

Home: Designs of the times

West County Design—almost better than the Valley Ford sandwiches

by Linda Xiques

You know how it is when you get a man in a car—his hands planted firmly on the steering wheel, his mind set on getting home. It's almost impossible to get him to stop. We were headed back from Sea Ranch one recent weekend. It's a long and winding road and I was getting hungry. After passing several likely luncheon spots in Bodega Bay with no signs of slowing down, I set my hopes on Valley Ford. I knew Himself wouldn't spring for a five-course Italian meal at Dinucci's, but I thought I might score a sandwich and a soda pop at a deli.

As luck would have it, there was a deli sign attached to the time-worn Valley Ford Market and I convinced him to pull in. This was fortuitous for two reasons: #1, the "barbecued tri-tip special" was delicious, and #2, we discovered West County Design, an additional feast for the eyes, filled with beautiful handmade furniture and the most amazing concrete counters and sinks for kitchen or bath.

Located in a weathered, barn-like building next to the market, West County Design serves as a showroom for the work of two master craftsmen: furniture-maker Craig Collins and concrete-wizard Patrick Miller of Bohemian Stoneworks. It is also a gallery of home accessories and artifacts created by a dozen local artists. Sharon Eager, who is married to Collins, manages the gallery, which opened last summer.

Eager says, "The whole genesis of West County Design is three people who really want to live and work out here on the coast." She and her husband bought a fixer-upper beach cottage just north of Bodega Bay five years ago and he relocated Craig Collins Furniture from San Rafael where he'd been working since 1987.

Shortly after the move, Collins found shop space next to Miller's workshop and the two men wound up collaborating on several kitchen projects—Collins building the cabinets and Miller creating the countertops. Needing a place to display their work—their dusty workshops just wouldn't do—they opened the showroom in Valley Ford and added gallery space to make "a richer mix." It proved to be a wise decision. Casual visitors stop by expecting to pick up an artful gift item and leave with their heads buzzing with ideas for a major remodel.

Collins's furniture is clean and contemporary, reflecting both craftsman and art deco design influences, with a hint of Asian sensibility. His designs won a Niche Award in Niche Magazine's national competition in 1997 and have been featured in several Marin Designers Showcase homes.

As to Miller's creations, forget all thoughts of gray, drab concrete. His counter surfaces are as smooth and shiny as marble, the colors unbelievably rich and subtle. Forget too about hemming and hawing over tile, granite or marble; once you see the possibilities of

concrete, you'll want it in your kitchen or bath. In some of the examples on display, the concrete sink and countertop were cast as one piece; in others, the concrete counter was cast around a freeform basin of metal, the whole thing polished to such a high sheen that you can't detect a joint line. In another attractive option, a bowl-shaped concrete basin sits atop a counter like a piece of rock sculpture. There are photo samples on the Web site www.westcountydesign.com, but to appreciate the richness of the colors and the dense smoothness of the surfaces, you really should see them firsthand.

Both Collins and Miller came to their craft from other endeavors. Collins, now 50, started out studying boat building. He met his wife while working as a sailing instructor at Cass's Marina in Sausalito. From boats, he got interested in furniture design and went to work for furniture-maker Thomas Fetherston in San Francisco, later studying furniture design at UC Berkeley. He sold his first creations in Sausalito before opening his shop in San Rafael. He says his experience as a boat-builder still influences his designs. "It developed my eye, because boat building is more about vision than measuring." Practically everything on a boat is a curve, he says, and even today, "Very rarely do I build something without a subtle curve to it."

Patrick Miller, 48, worked in high-tech animation doing special effects for games and movies before starting to build his own home in Occidental in 1995. As he tells it, "I was looking through design magazines for ideas and I saw pictures of the first concrete countertops. I thought—man, that's what I want in my house. But when I started calling around, I couldn't find anyone who was doing it." Fortunately, his father was a structural engineer and knew something about concrete. Together they invented an ultra-dense concrete formula that Miller used to create the countertops, sinks and fireplace surround for his house. Soon admirers spread the word and he started getting orders for his custom countertops. In 2001, he quit his day job and founded Bohemian Stoneworks.

Miller's work has continued to evolve. "Concrete is concrete," he says. "The challenge is to make it look mysterious." He adds glass to the mix, slices up river rocks, experiments with colors. For a seafood restaurant, he added oyster shells to the tabletops. Right now he has a client who is supplying nautilus fossils to incorporate into the design.

Both men are environmentally conscious in their work. Miller gets his sand, gravel and stones from a family-owned quarry that harvests gravel sustainably on Austin Creek. Collins tries to choose local wood grown and processed nearby. He's at work now on a table of local claro walnut. The wood arrives in long, rough slabs, "but sequenced out of the same tree—that's important." Then he studies the material to decide how best to use it. "Sometimes you have to let the wood dictate the finished piece."

Though he still works on two or three kitchens a year, Collins prefers designing and building tables because "it lets me be more of a sculptor than a cabinetmaker." He says he loves the traditions associated with the family dining table, the idea that he is making something that families will gather around for years to come and pass on to another generation.

Gallery manager Eager says the artists who show their work at West County Design share a similar aesthetic. They all work with natural elements and favor simple, clean lines. She calls the gallery "a glorious interaction—there's an incredible wealth of artists in this area." The gallery features such items as stoneware from Gerry Arrington, framed mirrors from Deborah Childress, copper lamps from Robert Innes, forged iron furniture from John O'Hare. Vivid fruit and vegetable paintings by Sylvia Gonzales currently adorn the walls. A new show of Charles Beck's paintings of the Sonoma coastal area opens July 21 as part of the gallery's one-year anniversary celebration.

Eager has developed a strong attachment to each of the artists she represents at the gallery. "They're such nice people and they do great work. They each have chosen their own unique niche." She's glad to know the artists and have the chance to talk to others about their work. "You know," she confides, "artists can be shy."

West County Design, 14390 Highway One, Valley Ford, is open Thursday through Sunday, 10am to 5pm and by appointment. For further information, visit their Web site at www.westcountydesign.com or call the gallery, 707/876-1963 or e-mail seager@westcountydesign.com.

Eating in Valley Ford

Food-loving Marinites may wonder if they should pack some provisions before setting off to this tiny hamlet. A note of reassurance: You can eat well in Valley Ford. The "delicious sandwich" mentioned earlier? That was an understatement. Dennis Becker's tri-tip special (\$6.99) was the best sandwich I have ever eaten. Picture this: juicy barbecued beef slices, smothered with red onions and Swiss cheese, toasted to melty perfection on a French roll. It was high-calorie heaven, eaten outside on a nearby picnic table.

Becker is "the best butcher in west Sonoma" according to Sharon Eager. He sells Harris Ranch beef and makes his own sausages. The whole family works at the store—his wife, two sons and a mother-in-law. The Valley Ford Market (707/876-3245) has been there since horse and buggy days and looks it, but don't let that put you off. You'll be missing a bet. Sharon Eager recommends the newish restaurant across the street, Rocker Oyster Fellers (707/876-1983).

Located in the Valley Ford Hotel, the restaurant specializes in "American comfort food" such as braised pork with corn cakes or buttermilk fried chicken; oysters are barbecued on summer weekends. Brunch is served Saturday and Sunday, 9:30am-1pm; dinner every night 5-9:30pm except Monday.

And there's Dinucci's (707/876-3260), which has been serving five-course family-style Italian dinners since 1908. Open Monday, Thursday, Friday 4-9pm, Saturday and Sunday 11am-9pm. Closed Tuesday and Wednesday.