

# Organically Inspired

A master craftsman builds a very grown-up tree house on Maryland's Eastern Shore

BY MARILYN MILLSTONE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CELIA PEARSON

**Trees.** For studio furniture maker Vicco Von Voss, they are his teachers and his building materials, the inspiration that links his life with his livelihood. His reverence for them is evident in the airy contemporary timber-framed house he designed and built in 2004 on Maryland's Eastern Shore.

Set back on five secluded acres overlooking Island Creek near Chestertown, the house is constructed mostly from local salvaged wood, in keeping with Von Voss's belief in sustainability. Only 33 of the hundreds of trees used to build the house were cut—and those were white pine trees from a friend's property “that we cut with the intention of giving them a new life,” he says.

The Von Voss home brings the outdoors in with huge windows offering sweeping views of nearby Island Creek in Chestertown, Md. The artist's handcrafted furniture, made exclusively from salvaged fallen trees, incorporates whimsical touches, as is evident in this elongated high-back chair.



“I’d go to sleep looking at the stars and wake up looking at the leaves.”



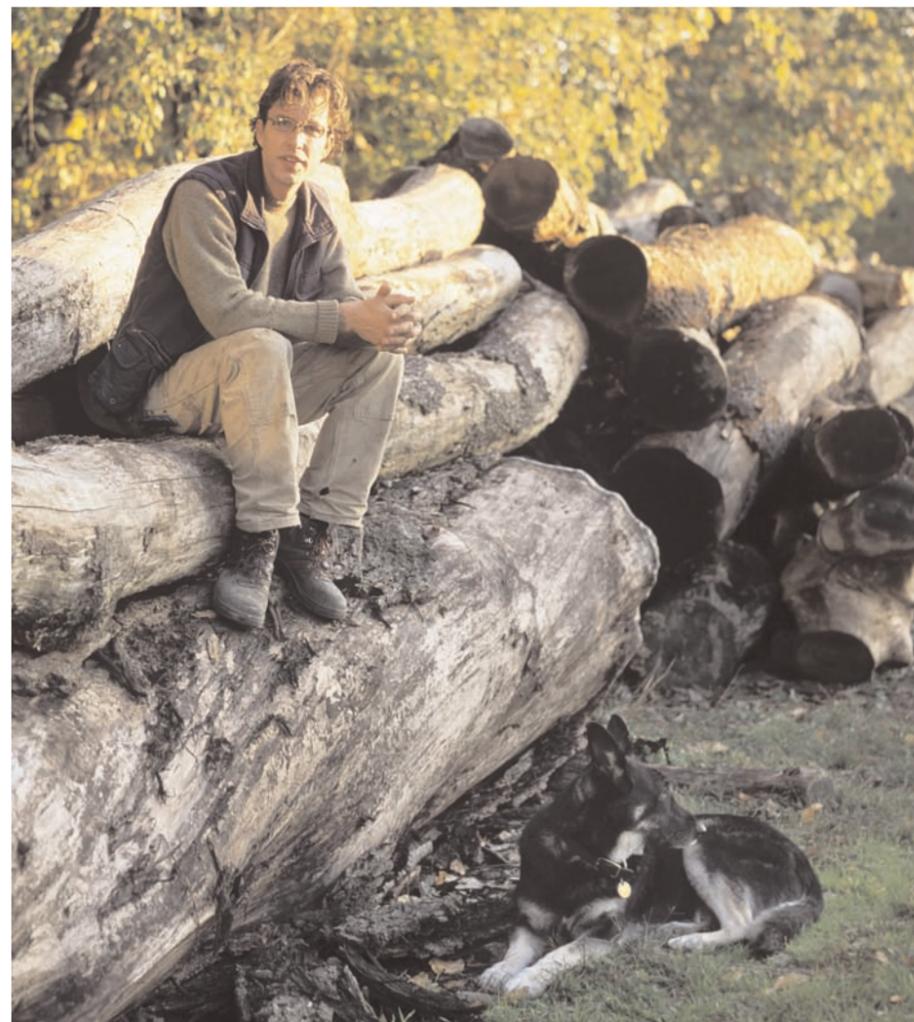
The heart of the home is the kitchen, with a cozy dining area nestled into a windowed tower suffused with natural light.

“Every tree has a spirit in it,” notes the lanky 42-year-old as he tenderly rubs the massive red oak “summer beam” that serves as the structure’s primary support. “This tree used to stand where the stove is now,” he explains. “By incorporating it into the house, I’ve brought the spirit of the land into my home.”

Although Von Voss built his house—and his life—on American soil, his roots are in Germany, where he was born. His father was a businessman whose career relocated the family to a variety of exotic locations across the globe. When he finally had to choose for himself which country to call home, though, it wasn’t easy.

In 1991, shortly after graduating from Washington College in Chestertown with a degree in art and chemistry, he returned to Germany to apprentice as a cabinet maker, but he found Europe “too restrictive,” and came back to the United States.

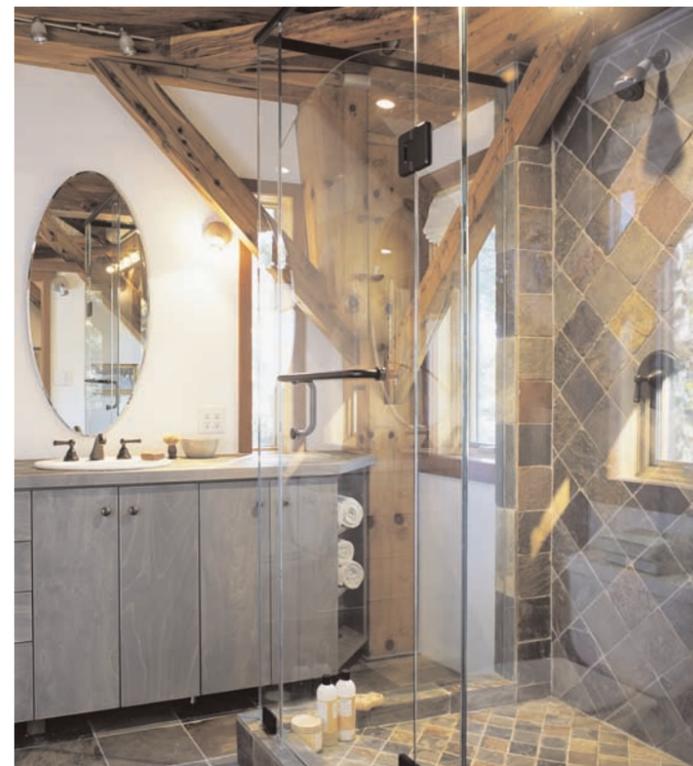
Encouraged by his parents to obtain a master’s degree, he applied to the Rhode Island School of Design. He wasn’t accepted. Not long after, he was told, “Your furniture is beautiful, but you have no credibility. Why should I hire you?” Twice rejected, Von Voss countered by contacting one of his art professors at Washington College and asking for help. His resourcefulness landed him a job teaching pottery and a space to build furniture.



Clockwise from top left: Von Voss perched on an outsized stack of raw materials for new projects, with family dog Bella at his feet; “Nesting Bowl Table,” which took more than 450 hours to complete and was designed specifically to hold iconic Dale Chihuly art glass in its circular top; an undulating interior support beam that deliberately mimics branches of the trees outside; the meticulously detailed cedar and glass bathroom on the upper floor.



GEORGE DEWITT





Bella relaxes on the slate floor in front of the wood-fired stove in the kitchen, left. A steel spiral staircase with a custom cherry railing leads to the open and airy second floor.



## The undulating roofline was designed to echo the surrounding undulating canopy of trees.

“The Chestertown community is just phenomenal,” he says, recalling how residents gave or loaned him the tools he needed to launch his furniture-making business. Commissions started coming his way, and he “had so much fun” building furniture that he decided to just keep at it after his six-month stint at the college ended.

In 1995, Von Voss opened his own wood shop in downtown Chestertown. Unable to afford living in town, he camped out on open land his parents owned 13 miles away. Finally, he remembers saying to himself, “This is ridiculous. I’m going to build a cabin.”

Using all salvaged materials, he built an 8x12-foot cabin with a small loft that had no electricity or indoor plumbing. A wood stove supplied him with heat, and a pet goat—which took up residence in the tiny cabin with him—supplied companionship.

“It was such a simple life,” Von Voss recalls of the place he called home for more than eight years. And it was there that he formed his close relationship with trees.

“I lived under them and observed them. I’d go to sleep looking at the stars and wake up looking at the leaves. It was a most amazing connection.”

Then his parents sold the property out from under him. “In my family, we jokingly refer to this as my eviction,” he laughs. But Von Voss believes his life is touched by magical moments like the one that followed next: a Chestertown man heard about his dilemma and offered him a job as caretaker of his property. The artist accepted, and brought his cabin with him.

When Von Voss decided to build a house, magic happened again: the man offered to sell him part of his property. Von

Voss accepted, taking four-and-a-half years to design and build the elegant 1,200 square-foot home where he and his family, wife Jacqui and daughter Ella, live today. As with his makeshift cabin, which still stands on the property, this grander dwelling reflects Von Voss’s fundamental desire to “live with no boundaries between inside and outside.” The undulating roofline, for example, was designed to echo the surrounding undulating canopy of trees. “I wanted the roofline to disappear,” he explains, “so it appears as if the house had always been here.”

Rounded wood-and-glass towers flank the sides of the house, filling both floors with natural light. They recall the silos of old Maryland barns, a structure Von Voss admires; they are also an architectural element favored by Frank Lloyd Wright, whom he considers a primary influence. Inside, the ground-floor plan is completely open, with wood columns artfully positioned to create a sense of separate spaces. Two supporting pillars made from the crooks of a local maple enclose the sunken living room. The dining table, positioned near one tower’s soaring bank of windows, is cradled by columns of Eastern white pine. Floating across the center of the space is a curved island made of locally salvaged cherry wood.

Near the front entrance, a winding staircase leads to the soaring upper floor, which includes an aromatic cedar and glass bathroom, a nursery, and a master bedroom and balcony overlooking the swaying grasses and shimmering waters of Island Creek.

The entire house was built without nails, using traditional pegged mortise and tenon joinery. “This structure will be here for 300 years,” Von Voss says confidently.

Sprinkled throughout the house are examples of Von Voss’s handcrafted wood furniture. He attributes his style to what he terms “a balance of masculine and feminine”—trying to counter straight edges, which he considers masculine, with curved lines he associates with the feminine, with trees and with nature. This balance is evident in the cherry door he built to turn his once-open yoga studio into a private “paradise” for Ella. A masculine vertical strip of yellow wood runs down the center, accenting the door’s feminine, arched shape. Inspired by the Indian concept of energy chakras, he carved an egg above the strip to symbolize Ella’s crown chakra; below the strip, a pointed carving signifies her root chakra. On the back of the door are two signature flourishes: a tiny carving of the Von Voss family crest (a fox on its hind legs) and, embedded into the wood, a shiny new 2010 penny, signifying the year in which the door was completed.

Occasionally a piece of furniture evolves into sculpture. One such piece, a tall, slender cherry-and-ebony creation he calls “Madonna,” sits in a corner of the living room. It developed out of a failed design for a chair. He exhibited “Madonna” in a gallery show and was later approached by a potential buyer. “I said I’d never sell her,” he recalls, but needing money to finish building the house, he reluctantly let it go.

Six years later, friends surprised him by pooling their resources and buying back “Madonna” for him. He shakes his head, remembering how moved he was by their generosity. “Magic,” he says, “is always in my life.” ●

Frequent contributor **MARILYN MILLSTONE** is thrilled that the Baltimore Playwrights Festival/Fells Point Corner Theatre will produce her first play, *The Sculptress*, this summer.