

Ideas on Finishes for Utility Bowls

There are 2 kinds of finishes, membrane and penetrating oils. Membrane finishes should never be considered for utility items. Membranes are lacquers, waxes, some polys, friction polishes and many others (anything that sits on the surface). These finishes are inappropriate because they break down fast with use. They break down fastest in the place most scrubbed leaving blotches of raw wood stains where the finish has broken down. It has long been agreed upon that membrane finishes be avoided for this purpose. Not to mention you are eating the broken down material.

Penetrating oils are nut oils, vegetable oils, tung, lindseed mineral, plus many others. These oils penetrate into the wood and become literally part of the bowl. In the case of mineral and vegetable oils, (both excellent finishes for utility) these materials eventually evaporate and have to be applied frequently to keep the bowl "oiled". Tung and lindseed oils are excellent finishes for their appearance and water proofing. The biggest drawback is they are blended with metallic dryers (benzene, mineral spirits) to make them dry faster. My galleries will not accept this finish because of the smell and liability of people eating off a toxic surface. Eventually the dryers burn-off leaving a durable penetrating oil finish. This takes months. There are two nut oils that dry: walnut and almond. My oil has been heat treated to make it dry faster because both almond and walnut, like lindseed and tung, take months to dry without chemically altering them. My oil is a natural wood oil that penetrates and binds with the wood without the drawbacks of all the others.

The bowls I make for my galleries have a walnut oil finish and a beeswax/carnauba wax topping (my wax product). This leaves a low luster type appearance. I sand the bowls to 400 grit and then spray the bowls with a mist of water to raise the grain and then go back with 400 to cut the raised grain (you will never get raised grain after this). If my bowls were shiny the customers would take them home and use them and be very disappointed because the bowl would never look like it did the day they purchased it. My finish will look relatively like the day it was purchased. If they want to, they can re-apply the wax occasionally to make the bowls pretty for the market. Wax is a membrane finish only used to give the bowl a slight luster - it is gone the minute it is scrubbed-off.

My motto is if it has a shiny finish it shouldn't be used with food. Besides, shiny finishes (lacquers and polys) are cold to the touch because they dry like plastic, ruining the wood feel.

One more item...

My personal feeling is that a bowl, plate, cutting board etc. does not need any finish if it has been made properly. Finishes are to make the piece more beautiful for sales purposes. If a bowl cracks it has probably been mistreated, i.e. put in the dish washer or left in the sink in standing water or, most likely, dropped. The biggest reason for a cracked bowl is because the craftsman has tried to glue a defect. Glue will always fail on a structural defect. Wood is a constant living product and glue is not. There are so many other factors to consider when making a utility item. The most important is using the appropriate timbers that can take the daily abuse; the subject of countless emails.

Thanks and good luck,

Mike