



## SAVOIR 'FAIR'

Ruston woodworker Joshua Mitchell works to bring together creatives as well as the larger community

BY **Jeffrey Roedel**  
PORTRAIT BY **Romero & Romero**

**A ROCKSLIDE OF CRAWFISH** crumbling out onto awaiting trays meets passersby as the crowds seek out the Railroad Festival, downtown Ruston's latest community of creative revelry. The festival is a lively celebration of the creativity and culture of north Louisiana. Nestled in the heart of downtown Ruston, the event attracted a handful of Louisiana bands, food trucks and vendors, and more than one hundred makers from around Louisiana and the region.

On the other side of the food trucks and a sloping lawn, the Seratones warm up in big brassy top notes. Behind shades and a standard-issue event badge, festival founder Joshua Mitchell greets two friends with big bear hugs.

From a narrow slip of an alley next to Pontchatoulas restaurant and its outboard crawfish-boiling brigade, this 30-year-old artist gives his friends the scoop on the event, and there's plenty to dish.

More than 100 makers' tents shotgun a strip of land between a retail-dominated row of development and the former lanes of the Rock Island Line, forming the backbone of this brand new event that, on this hot April day, seems to have drawn hundreds of folk from all across north Louisiana and beyond. This first-year festival is the brainchild of Mitchell, himself a woodworker and designer, whose work as an event organizer was born out of a desire to explore the space between creator and consumer.

"The term maker already has such a general, sometimes misunderstood definition, and I really wanted to explore what it meant to creatives and the general public of the area," Mitchell says. "This is so important, because when you pick up something from an event like this, you feel like you're going home with a piece of that artist, and after meeting



them you can connect with the piece on a more personal level."

A few years ago, Mitchell saw a need in Ruston for a more collective culture that can connect buyers directly with the regional creatives who make their favorite things. He first founded Ruston Makers Fair. Now, Railroad Fest is the same idea plugged into a higher wattage amplifier. But Mitchell's events are less an addition to, and more of a reflection of the city he's grown to appreciate more and more.

"Ruston is the definition of a small town with big dreams," says Mitchell, who was born in Darmstadt, Germany, and spent much of his youth in Maryland. "And through the process of creating this festival I've gotten a glimpse of how we can make progress. I've worked closely with the city and city organizations throughout, and I've really been blown away by their work ethic and open mindedness."

Mitchell was a curious child, he says, always tinkering with things, modifying toys and tools and pieces of artwork.



"I just didn't like things to be normal," he says. "They had to be added to or fixed in some way."

That desire for change and disdain for malaise often led him to travel outside of his new hometown of Ruston.

"There was just never anything to do here," Mitchell recalls. "And that's probably the biggest reason why I've chosen now to build things, to do something here rather than constantly scurry away."

Mitchell studied architecture at Louisiana Tech for a couple of years but left to start his own firm making custom furniture, called Jodami Design. As makers meet one another and each passionately

shares their story with patrons who walk into these booths as strangers and walk out as friends, Mitchell's Railroad Festival bares the handprints of a designer — the unmistakable mark of intentionality and purpose pervades these communal festival grounds.

"What happens with makers' fairs is that the public gets genuinely excited about supporting local artists and businesses and in turn, those makers get excited about participating in a local event," he says. "It all goes hand in hand. The city of Ruston as a whole is a prime example of this notion, and it's exciting to see." ■



## Q&A

**What do you do when you're not working in your studio or planning your next event?**

These days if I'm not working I'm exploring. Kayaking is one of my favorite things to do to pass the time. Ruston has great spots to do that and to venture out, for sure. The bayous of Monroe are beautiful and made for adventure, too. I really enjoy being on the water. Other than that I'm probably just getting out and trekking somewhere.

I try to get up to Arkansas and a couple other places to camp and explore when I can. I'm a pretty outdoorsy guy.

**Who has inspired you the most along the way?**

People that have inspired me along the way would be any maker or artist who is making things happen. It inspires me even further when their passion is their main gig. It's tough to muster up the courage to take that leap and when I see artists working hard and doing well, it inspires me.

**Do you ever get back to Germany or have distinct memories of it? I**

wasn't in Germany long enough to have any strong memories and unfortunately have not been back yet. We bounced around to a couple of places on the East Coast, but when I think back on growing up, I miss Maryland the most. I guess you could say those were some of my wonder years where I was formulating opinions about life and all the things around me.



# BEYOND THE SURFACE

The environment is the driving force behind Thibodaux woodworker David Bergeron's work

BY **Jeffrey Roedel**  
PHOTOS BY **Romero & Romero**

**IT'S 7 A.M. AND DAVID** Bergeron is up with the sun. There's a smattering of fresh materials — junk to some, and new only to Bergeron's woodshop — waiting to be sorted, strategically stacked and readied for rebirth.

The artist saved this wood from languishing in a landfill. The material has weathered in wait for years and generations, making its way across the South and the neighborhoods of New Orleans, into much of coastal Louisiana closer to Bergeron's current home of Thibodaux.

As Bergeron gets to work on these vintage materials, he isn't so much fiddling with old



wood as assuming the role of a caretaker for something that could speak of stories of old. Maybe even a forgotten truth.

These slats and boards are the former bones of his city and he wakes up every morning to resurrect the dead.

He launched Bergeron Woodworks in his mid-20s, and now at 45, the Delgado Community College alum has built with his hands a kaleidoscopic body of reclaimed woodwork, from \$30 geometric picture frames to intricate custom-built benches, beds and tables that fetch thousands.

Growing up on the West Bank, Bergeron watched his grandfather, a woodworker and gardener, make a proud living and build the family homestead on a third-grade education.

"I kind of bounced around construction and was lucky enough to encounter a few very talented people," Bergeron says. "I just tried to keep my mouth shut and watch."

His work is time-intensive, due to the nature of the materials and the fact that he's doing everything he can to maintain the integrity and color of the wood. It didn't take long for Bergeron's playful colors — which reflect the city's personality and his constant attention to detail — to catch the eye of the House of Blues. For a decade he helped to define the eclectic rainbow remix of designs that became part of the unforgettable aesthetic of the Decatur Street music mecca.

"At the beginning, [House of Blues] had a really talented in-house art and design department that was very focused on keeping the founder's vision intact," Bergeron says. "It was an incredible learning experience that I could not put a price on."

With the House of Blues as a client, Bergeron's sense of story and his passion for environmentally-friendly work led to three separate creative projects for the Bonnaroo Music & Arts Festival in Tennessee, including a series of 10-foot by 10-foot frames for



## Q&A

**What do you do for fun when you're not putting in 10 hours inside the shop?** I've been

really getting into the work of the abstract expressionist painter Richard Diebenkorn lately — for whatever that's worth. Mostly, I'm an outdoors kind of person. So running I love. Being out in nature, hiking and beer. I'm trying to get a better grip on the organic gardening thing too, but that is proving to be quite the learning curve, ha.

**Do you feel like you have to seek out inspirations and explore other people's art to move forward?**

People are always recommending that I check out the work of so-and-so, but I'm a firm believer in 'protecting the eye.' In other words, I feel like everything we take in or experience affects us so I like to curate that very carefully.

**Your work used the old bones of structures of New Orleans, so in a very tangible way, New Orleans influences your work. Why did you decide this was the place for your woodwork to thrive? Can you define the spirit of the city?**

New Orleans has an openness that is a lot harder to find in the rest of the South. I grew up in a lower-to-middle income, blue-collar and culturally-diverse area, and I wouldn't change that for anything. Just people helping people and figuring it all out.

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housing acclaimed rock photographer Danny Clinch's work. The festival founders responded well to the principals of sustainability that Bergeron's work professes, but this wasn't always the case. Twenty years ago the populace was much more timid about purchasing furniture from salvaged materials.

"People would approach the work with interest and then back off when you said it was from the trash," Bergeron recalls. "Now when you say it's from the trash they move forward."

Protecting the environment has always been his driving force, he says. In 2016 alone, Bergeron diverted more than five tons of material from the waste stream.

"When its all said and done, that is something I will lay my head on," he says.

If de-nailing wood slats for days on end has his muscles feeling like they are filled with battery acid, or the soothing effects of a new color palette of well-weathered materials has his childlike wonder lit and aloft, all of it is part of his process and central to the more fundamental desire Bergeron holds for his life's work. He wants to see beyond the surface of all things — inanimate and living. At the very heart of Bergeron's craft is a search for a kind of glory in someone else's garbage, a rescue mission for the rebirthed and bright future of what was once cast away.

"The most rewarding thing is creating value in a piece of material that is otherwise unwanted," Bergeron says. "I think that with a little time and creativity, all people and materials have value." ■



## Q&A

**You've certainly figured things out, and had some incredibly recognizable clients like the House of Blues and Bonnaroo. You must have come across some celebrities. I did do a piece for Brad Pitt's Make It Right 9 Project in the Lower 9th Ward, and I got to meet him. I went to introduce myself, and he says 'Oh, I know who you are, I love your stuff.'**

**That's a great story. Pitt seems to be someone with a keen eye for design and construction and I can't imagine how many new people he met and worked with during the entire project, so that's a compliment. Any tales of rock 'n' roll from working for the Bonnaroo? I don't think any of my rock 'n' roll stories are fit for print, ha!**

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# FLOUR POWER

New Orleans bread baker Graison Gill spreads the gospel of traditional bread-making

BY **Jeffrey Roedel**  
PHOTOS BY **Romero & Romero**

▶ **IF THERE IS MAGIC, IT LIES NOT IN THE** recipe, but in the raw materials and the mighty movement of the maker's hand. These ingredients are fundamental forces harnessed for an acute, time-honored process, even as myriad results can feel — and taste — infinite.

From only flour and water and salt, the baker calls forth bread.

"It's very zen that there's this beautiful variety in a constant exercise you do every day," says Graison Gill, the 30-year-old owner of Bellegarde Bakery.

Bread is often the first thing we eat in the morning, or at night after a long day. It's likely the initial offering placed on a table at a restaurant. Unfortunately, this regularity can foster a lack of intentional thought about the food that serves as the foundation for "companion," deriving from the Latin term for "someone you break bread with."

"If you're served wine, you'll be told who grew the grapes, where, when it was made and a little about the flavor," Gill says, "But get served bread, and it's just 'here's bread.' The thing is, it's really shitty for restaurants to serve mediocre bread."

Though the Redondo Beach, California native speaks in impassioned, almost spiritual terms when food topics are on offer, he views his work as a craft of diligence rather than an art of freeform expression. "I'm too conservative to be an artist," Gill says. "I like rules."

In four years, Gill's grains have spread through Jefferson Parish and into Orleans Parish, with a large portion of his business coming from wholesale purchases by Rouses Market, Whole Foods and area restaurants, including Bacchanal Wine, La Petite Grocery, Compère Lapin and Kenton's, among many others.

Using high-quality, regionally-sourced ingredients like Louisiana-grown wheat



from Inglewood Farms near Alexandria and coastal Louisiana salt from the McIlhenny Company on Avery Island, a 40-inch stone mill custom made from solid granite, and an overnight refrigerated fermenting process of dough called retarding, loaves are baked fresh every morning. About 5,000 of them roll out of the oven and off into the city from Bellegarde Bakery every week.

"Other than the guy that drives the truck, the farmer and the baker are the only people who touch this wheat before it is eaten," Gill says.

It's late afternoon, "after hours" for the bakery that gets humming at 4 a.m. each day, and Gill is working at his desk in a small room off the main space where massive sacks of flour hang and loaves are formed at a long white table. Lunch was gumbo and crab claws, and the swampy, aromatic remains of both emanate from a stovetop next to a few slices of bread and meet the clean smooth smell of fresh flour saturating the air.

Behind Gill is the modest bread pan he baked his first loaf in at home a decade ago soon after moving to New Orleans. It's filled now with pens and office supplies, a metaphor of his evolution from bread baker at local farmer's markets and restaurants, to student at the San Francisco Baking Institute, to the founder and CEO of



## Q&A

**What do you enjoy doing when you're not here at the bakery or connecting with the community through Bellegarde?** I have a canoe, and I'll take that out on the North Shore. I prefer going to Bayou Manchac.

**What appeals to you about paddling in the wild?** I suppose I think of nature as my church, and it's nothing but a beautiful cathedral over there. It's best place to go on a boat.

**We've talked about basketball, cards and pool, but I wanted to ask you about backgammon, because that is a much rarer hobby for a young man.** I do play more basketball than backgammon these days, but I love the texture of the backgammon: the chips, the dice, the sounds of the game, the board. And I enjoy how it's a perfect balance between strategy and fate. There are infinite choices in playing the hand that's dealt you, so to speak. The key is to allow certain angles in order to deny others.

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his own bakery. Gill leads a team of a half-dozen full-time employees and five part-time assistants, drivers and shapers at Bellegarde.

"Nature is a church, and its rhythm a prayer. The democracy of food, that most basic human right, is the stewardship of our humanity," Gill pens in the lyrically-milled manifesto anchoring his bakery's socially- and environmentally-conscious website filled with a personal travel blog, stirring poetry, food histories and mysteries and of course an order form for Bellegarde's four made-daily stock varieties: Country Bread, Country Rye, Ciabatta and Fresh Flour.

Gill says Bellegarde has been intentionally conservative on growth so far with a fixed focus on quality. He does have his eye on expanding distribution to the North Shore and Baton Rouge soon, though, and bringing more formality and promotion to the small group baking classes he and his staff conduct to share not only their traditional bread-making methods but their passion for eating local in support of smaller regional farms, growers and Louisiana fishermen.

"We have this wonderful cuisine but hardly any of it is being made from local ingredients anymore," Gill says. "That's the



hypocrisy I see. Food is a transformation of energy from where it is grown and how it is made. What goes into it is what will come out. That's why at Bellegarde, we make choices that are best for our bread and for our community." ■



## Q&A

**Where in New Orleans do you live?** I'm in the Marigny and [am] very comfortable there. I love the rest of the city, but I'm one of those people that doesn't cross Canal [Street] unless there's something special going on.

**What are your go-to spots in your neighborhood?** I like Faubourg Wines, Mimi's, Mariza, and Press Street Station very much.

**You're well traveled.**

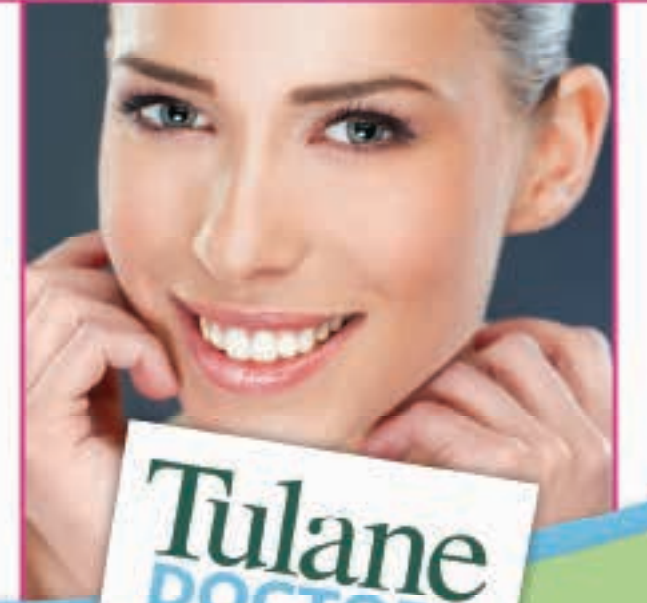
**Where is the farthest you've gone to learn about the craft of bread-making?** I've spent about a month in Sweden — in some very remote parts of it — and had a most tremendous time there. It's a gorgeous country, and the people are exceptional in their uniqueness and warmth. They take some time to thaw out, but once they understand you they're incredibly humble, generous, thoughtful. I think those conservative values translate into their cuisine. Their's is very simple, salt of the earth food, made with the ingredients found close by there. Much like cuisine used to be in New Orleans.

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