

# Grains of change

Greenville  
Journal  
10/16/09

Upstate woodworking company uses wheat, sunflower hulls to keep it green

Ben Ratterree needed to make a living.

Here he was a Wofford College graduate, an Army veteran with four years of active duty, newly married, a baby on the way, rejected by medical school and 30.

"So, I said, 'this is frustrating. I'll do something I enjoy doing,' so I started building custom furniture in a friend's garage in September of 04."

And that's how Blue Ridge Cabinetworks began. Now housed in reclaimed space in an abandoned strip mall between Reidsville Road and Interstate 26 in Spartanburg, Ratterree's company is a textbook example of growing a business by doing what you like, pushing your learning curve, embracing technology, striving for perfection, being open to new markets, beating the bushes for clients the old-fashioned way and enjoying a little luck.

From building cabinets with band, table and miter saws and with traditional materials, Ratterree today uses a sophisticated computer-driven router and green materials ranging from the exotic – and expensive – composites of wheat straw and sunflower hulls to the more mainstream but affordable fiber particles. >

By Dick Hughes, Contributing Writer

Particle board made from wheat stalk fibers contains no formaldehyde.

Greg Beckner/Staff

> Blue Ridge is one of the few millworkers in South Carolina certified at the highest standard of quality by the American Woodworking Institute. It meets federal environmentally friendly and energy efficient regulations and qualifies as a contractor for LEEDs (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design).

At a time when building companies are struggling, Blue Ridge is doing okay with government work and school building, both renovations and new.

Blue Ridge participated in the \$1.2-million, LEED-certified restoration of an old cotton mill office as home for Wofford College's Glendale Shoals Environmental Studies Center. Blue Ridge built the cabinets, including some from reclaimed heart pine, and finished a bookcase original to the building.

The company just finished work at Hillcrest High School in Simpsonville and is working on projects at Boiling Springs Elementary and Spartanburg High School, the latter site offering Ratterree nostalgic irony as one who took a ribbing for loving shop class while a student.

The company also is working on two major military projects, one at Fort Gordon near Augusta where it is building cabinetry for a dining hall and barracks, and the other at Fort Jackson at Columbia where it also is working on a dining hall.

Even with residential and commercial construction in the dumps, Ratterree expects 2009 revenues to be up 33 percent to \$750,000 from 2008 but below a 2006 high of \$1.2 million when Blue Ridge got its windfall opportunity.

In a lucky break, the company landed a contract with Salsarita's Fresh Cantina, a Charlotte-based chain with a heavy concentration in the southeast and east, scattered stores in the south and Midwest and plans for restaurants nationwide. There are two in Greenville.

"Through a friend, they asked me initially to do some tabletops for them," he said. "The tabletops turned into doing entire stores with all the cabinetry and the bar. That really got the company started, and to this point we've done 90 of their stores for them."

The work for Salsarita's opened doors to some other commercial work, but brought



Greg Beckner/Staff

Blue Ridge Cabinet Works owner Ben Ratterree stands in front of a CNC router on the floor of his company's shop. The company offers earth-friendly alternatives to tradition cabinet building materials, including particle board made from wheat stalk fiber.

challenges. Ratterree realized he had to diversify so as not to be dependent on a single client or industry. He needed to improve productivity and learn new skills if he wanted to grow and be price-competitive.

"We did everything by hand – table saws and hand tools. As this business started picking up, we had to either increase manpower or buy some equipment that would make us more efficient."

He leased a high-speed, computer-driven CNC router made by Thermwood Corp. of Dale, Ind. Without it, Ratterree said, he would need at least three more full-time employees – he has six, including himself – and would be less competitive in bidding for jobs.

Just as important, he said, are the mistake-free precision of the cuts, the high degree of certainty all the parts will fit together properly and the ability to use programmed software to infinitely repeat the pattern.

Building a bigger and broader base of potential clients was a priority. Ratterree called on commercial contractors and architects.

"Now we will get six, 10 bid requests a week," he said.

Joining the Association of General Contractors "was a major boon for us."

He also counts becoming certified by the Architectural Woodwork Institute as one of the smartest things he did.

"It took us six to eight months to get it.

You have to complete an exam, and they inspect the facility and samples of work, and they inspect at least two jobs."

His is the only certified shop in Spartanburg and is one of 20 in the state.

"When the architect says, 'I want an AWI certified job,' we say in bold print, YES. That helps us in this tight market."

The green door opened with Blue Ridge's work on the renovation of Upstate Forever's Pettigru headquarters in Greenville as a model of environmental and energy efficiency. Blue Ridge made the cabinetry with materials from wheat stocks and sunflower seed hulls.

"We have kind of gone that route," Ratterree noted. "We were pretty excited about that, getting to use new materials and getting our feet wet on that kind of woodwork. Before, we hadn't done anything with it."

With interest growing in the green segment, he sees it as growing part of his business.

"It sounds daunting at first, and there is a lot to learn. There's definitely more paperwork involved to record what material you are using and how much it will cost, but beyond the paperwork and documentation, you can find the builders; and once you have those materials sourced it is a pretty easy proposition."

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