



Sydney antiques dealer Sally Beresford adores oak; she did so even as a child. And when the supply of her beloved French oak farmhouse tables dried up, she did the next best thing and re-created the original

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TABLES TURNED

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PETITE, TANNED, and trim in her workroom smock, the chatelaine of not one but two Eastern Suburbs haute-interiors salons, Sally Beresford doesn't look much like your average tree hugger, but tree lover she is. On her very first visit to a debarking mill in the north of France some years back, Beresford was sickened by the process: "It was like skinning a pet; these beautiful trees that had been growing for hundreds of years. Eighteen months later, I still could not go into the debarking shed."

The emotion of the recollection passed, Beresford regains her spry, businesslike composure, adding: "Mind you, they are at the end of their life; they'd be hollow and almost dead inside." Which is why, a couple of years on, her French Farmhouse Tables business is booming. It's a pursuit that grew out of her experience as a trader in antiques - her other business in Sydney's Woollahra that continues to this day. Finding it harder and harder to source the old French tables that she loved, a chance encounter with a timber miller at a Paris furniture fair took her in a whole new direction.



TRADITIONAL FRENCH OAK FARMHOUSE TABLE



CONTEMPORARY TABLE IN 400-YEAR-OLD FRENCH OAK



TOULOUSE IS BASED ON 17TH-CENTURY TAVERN TABLES

"A friend of mine from the south of France who designs very, very contemporary furniture invited us to a show he was having in Paris. I certainly wasn't impressed by his furniture but we did get to meet the chap from the timber mill and within days we'd visited the mill." It was here she had her nasty experience in the debarking shed but a new business was born of it. Sally Beresford picked up her hickory-handled mortise chisel and became an 'antique' table maker.

Her showroom in the once industrial and now very cool Sydney suburb of Waterloo is aglow with a sea of tables when *The AFR Magazine* calls in mid-morning on a hot February day. Reflected light bounces off the waxed surfaces, each one an original, thanks to beautifully aged timbers and Beresford's own adaptations of traditional farmhouse table elements as rendered by her team of artisan craftsmen using 17th-century joinery techniques. They seat anywhere from two to you-name-it.

Three massive pieces of raw elm, sycamore and oak are laid out for our inspection. Her plans for these will be a response to the grain and characteristics of the timber. On the tavern table that is new to the range, she points out an exaggerated mitred joint (not the usual 45-degree angle) that she incorporated into the frame to take advantage of a whorl in the wood and create a shape that will take a full dinner plate at either end of its 2.6-metre run. "I go to France and look at timber and let that dictate what I will do with it," she says, "which is I think [the opposite] of what a lot of people do. I can see it in my head; I can see what those tables are going to look like before we start making them, before we even put them on paper. Even in the rag trade, I would start with the fabric, not with the design."

And, yes, Beresford's penchant for design was first exercised at a sewing machine. "As a child I'd made dolls' clothes and I went on to make my own children's clothing. And then I went into the rag trade, in a small way. I was pushed by friends. I'd worked for [textile magnate and arts patron] John Kaldor at one stage and he said, 'Why don't you do your own thing?' And so I made clothes under my own label for 15 years. I didn't have my own stores. I used to sell privately in homes. I liked it that way."

Her move into antiques came after a few years as an interior decorator. Typically for Beresford, that hadn't been via the usual route either. "Chris [her second husband] and I had built a big house - I'd been foreman on the job and it was largely my design - and by the time there was only one child at home, we put it on the market. We had something like 200 people come through that first weekend. And that sort of led to people asking me to help them do their houses. So I was decorating and sourcing furniture for people until I decided I'd like to concentrate just on furniture. We had such a big family, I decided to specialise in big tables. I chased all over France and in the end, I brought in only five. The supply of traditional farmhouse tables had dried up."

TIMBER IS, more usually, a bloke's thing. So how did this stylish woman with a mop of blond curls, whose conversation is laced with terms such as 'mitre', 'mortise and tenon' and 'the wedged half-dovetail', develop her deep appreciation of wood and the centuries-old techniques that turn it into beautiful things? There were influences, she recalls. "My father used to make furniture - not the good furniture for our house - but simple things like bookcases. It was a hobby. And my mother-in-law, whose family had owned a timber mill in Beaudesert in Queensland, enrolled in a woodworking course around about the time I had two children. She made pieces in cedar and I don't like cedar but I am sure it did have a big influence on me."

Decidedly not a cedar fan, Beresford works with walnut, sycamore, cherry, elm, chestnut and her favourite, oak. "I like early Georgian English furniture, principally made of oak or fruit woods, but oak was the primary one used in Georgian furniture, and elm. When I was a child in Castle Hill, we had an enormous oak tree, English oak it was. I would climb up through the centre of this tree out onto a long branch, and I'd stay there for hours. I don't know what I did there but it was my spot and I loved that tree."

"My mother and my godmother were both passionate about oak furniture. My mother loved her pieces of 300-year-old furniture but her house was not dowdy. She had really

contemporary paintings alongside the antique furniture; there was always something quite quirky about mum's house. All the artworks that I have are contemporary, without exception. And I just love it with old furniture, love that look; and that's from my mother."

Despite her interest in trees and conservation, Beresford does not see herself as a greenie. "I suppose I am to a certain extent but I hadn't really thought about it. I was a vegetarian for a while; I just couldn't bear to think of eating a cow. I couldn't have beef cattle on our property; we have dairy cows and I say to them: 'Girls, you don't know how lucky you are, you're going to be here in six years' time.'

"No, I am not a greenie. I think the Greens, especially, have got quite a lot to answer for and they stop the natural process. I mean those recent bushfires, for instance, the Aborigines burnt that land regularly because they knew it needed to be done. Just like the French take down their oak trees after 500 or 600 years because those are the finest specimens; they have dropped their acorns, done their job and that's the time for them to go."

Beresford is full of praise for the way the French manage their huge oak plantations, their heritage and agriculture policies in general. "Every 70 years or so they go through and they'll cull the trees that are not going to grow into big tall straight trees and they're used for wine barrels. And the French accept that the government has devised the best method to care for the land and what they produce on the land. Even with grapes: what varieties they're permitted to grow and where they're permitted to grow them - and the French accept it. We wouldn't, I don't think."

Her collection has broadened to include contemporary pieces (she is just doing her first garden table) and these, still in aged timbers, include side tables and stools. She carries a limited range of decorative items, including handcrafted table lamps made by her friend Michael Yabsley, the Liberal Party federal treasurer and former minister in the Greiner and Fahey NSW governments. And not all of her tables end up in the dining room or country-house kitchen. Kerry Stokes and his board make their deliberations at a Sally Beresford table. Perhaps her ultimate coup is that the French themselves are now ordering her tables.

"Custodianship" is the way she likes to characterise her work and her approach to trees, to the land and to furniture. Something else she got from her mother. "My mother would say, 'Come on Sally, we're going to wax the furniture', and it was quite an enjoyable time. We'd both have our cloth and it didn't take us very long but it was something that we did together. And she'd say, 'It's the elbow grease that does it. Don't think you can just put it on and wipe it off; you've got to really give it a good rub.' It was caring for the furniture."

Strange, the journeys we take to find our way back to the mores and rituals of our childhood. Still waxing the furniture; still caring for the wood.

Opposite page: Sally Beresford in her St Peters workshop. Below: Craftsmen in the workshop use 17th century joinery techniques to create her range of beautiful artisan tables.

