

You can Catch a Cold, but Catches are Not Cool

An interview with René de la Fuente, a persistent new turner

Wells Shoemaker, December, 2019

René is one of the new members of the Santa Cruz Woodturners. Like all of us, he brings an intriguing life history to the common fascination of the lathe. Long ago an 18 wheeler driver, and for decades a supervisor at the Laguna Seca Raceway, René found himself with some spare time once the grind of M-F work abated.

René found a brand new, Harbor Freight lathe at a garage sale.

Q: Why was it never used, René?

A: Well, there was some assembly required, and the pulleys did not line up. The guy never got to use it. Neither could I, so I started from scratch, took it all apart, and discovered he put one pulley on backwards. That was all it took!

Q: René, did you have any experience with a lathe before?

A: No, but I figured I could make it work. Unfortunately, I was using regular hardware store woodwork chisels. I bought some 4x4's from Home Depot for practice, and got started. That didn't last long. Oh, golly, I pushed that chisel in, and everything got suddenly scary, and the lathe started jumping, and it fell down still turning. My wife asked me if I was sure I knew what I was doing.

Q: That's not something you'll soon forget! Did that discourage you?

A: No, I came up a few days later to join the club. Maarten helped me choose some tools from Tim's collection, and I learned how to sharpen them last meeting. That helped, but I still kept having some scary catches.

Q: All honest turners have had those. Did that discourage you?

A: Well, I watched lots of videos, but that wasn't too helpful. I got some encouragement, but, to be honest, it was still scary. I shared that by e-mail. It's really different when somebody guides your hand when you're getting started.

So that's what we did in a break between the storms.



Spindles for starters.

Then the bowl gouge.





Nothing quite as much fun as signing your first bowl. Port Orford cedar smells amazing! This one will stay unfinished.

Better than that...4 hours...and not a single catch.

Several messages to take home:

1. Get the right tools and keep them sharp! Long handles make a huge difference.
2. Catches lurk where the tool meets the wood. It's not the lathe's fault. Angles make a big difference.
3. Move the wood by hand to see how the blade meets the wood, and then do it with the motor running. Think peeling an apple, not stabbing a pumpkin.

4. Anchor the tool to the tool rest...the only place you really need muscle...and anchor the handle to your body when you can.
5. Respect the bevel and learn how to make it glide.
6. Cut when you can, scrape when you must.
7. Use your core muscles to move your tool, instead of forcing things with your shoulders and arms.
8. It's like skiing...or dancing: smooth, continuous movements instead of plunges and jerks.
9. Every turner has catches...but learn from them and pretty soon...they're not so many.
10. Ribbons of shavings are a beautiful thing.
11. Ask for help...because every turner is constantly learning...and sharing is a pleasure.

Santa Cruz Woodturners have lots of members willing to share advice and mentorship experiences. Come to the meeting and ask!

Q: What's next, René?

A: A bowl gouge, a spindle gouge, and a deeper bowl. I think I'm spending a lot more on tools than I did on this lathe. See you at the meeting

Sounds just right.

Wells Shoemaker
President for 2020