

FORGING THEIR STYLE



Maynard Studio's Matthew and Karine Maynard, considered among the world's leading architectural artist blacksmiths, create unique pieces for discerning clients

By Vickie Mitchell | Photos by Kirk Schlea



The Maynards create an array of products from candle holders and cooking utensils to balustrades and staircase railings.



Matt Maynard finishes a candle holder.

n their studio at a spot-in-the-road called Fox Creek in Anderson County, Matt and Karine Maynard turn metal into functional works of art. They are professional blacksmiths, although not the kind typically thought of in Central Kentucky. No horses are involved.

What might they craft? The list is long — railings for a winding staircase, fanciful window grilles that mimic trailing vines, gates so alluring you forget they are barriers. They've crafted sculptures, swings, tables, door pulls, thresholds, and chandeliers. If something can be made from metal, the Maynards can make it using hammers, anvils, and forges.

The awards that snake around their office wall attest to their talents. Matt's earned an Al Smith Fellowship from the Kentucky Arts Council; the interior design and architecture website Houzz has recognized their work. One of their largest projects, the Apiary in Lexington, brought them three gold and one silver international awards from the National Ornamental and Miscellaneous

Metals Association — the organization that represents some 500 professional blacksmiths in the U.S.



The Maynard insignia is handmade too.

It's a small profession, and the Maynards' specialty areas — railings and balustrades — make their work even more niche.

"When you think about it, 500 is not very many," said Karine. "Then, you think, 'How many of us like to do double floating curving staircases?' It gets very small very quick."

The Maynards' client base, on the other hand, is expanding. Although the pushpins that represent their projects, stuck in a map on an office wall, are still mostly concentrated in Kentucky, they are popping up from one coast to another, some even as far away as Italy.

Louisville interior designer Lee Stough was Matt Maynard's first client and has watched the Maynards and their business evolve. "They make this iron a living, breathing thing," she said. "Honestly, I think the sky is the limit for them."

Starting small along a rural road

Matt Maynard was a welder and machinist for nine years in North Carolina before he moved back to Kentucky to help his mother and stepfather build a log cabin in Anderson County. In the late 1990s, that project done, he set out to turn a longtime interest in blacksmithing into a career and set up shop in a former roadside grocery store in Fox Creek.

From there, the Yellow Pages and the Burning Man festival introduced him to two people who changed his life and his work.

Matt decided to market his new business by sending out 10 letters a week. He searched the Yellow Pages for names of architects and interior designers. Among the first recipients was Stough, who had just lost her metalworker. "It was really good timing," said Matt. "Lee started saying, 'Could you do this?' and I'd say, 'Yes!' and 'Could you do that?' 'Yes!' I never sent the next 10 letters." Instead, Stough kept him busy, making everything from metal curtain rods and bed frames to tables.

A few years later, in 2004, Matt went to Burning Man, the annual art and music festival in the Nevada desert. He and friend Chad Balster, a Louisville glass artist, met up with Karine, a graduate student in art history and art studio who'd been Balster's undergrad classmate. Matt and Karine immediately hit it off. "Our first date was a week in the desert at Burning Man," she said.

The next year, when Hurricane Katrina disrupted Karine's graduate school studies in New Orleans,



The Apiary in downtown Lexington displays an abundance of the Maynards' work.



Karine Maynard specializes in the finishes that jobs require.



The Maynards use a variety of tools to create their products. From top, an anvil and a hammer are fundamentals of the craft. Old-fashioned hammering helps form a hand-forged fireplace tool. The tool is further refined with a pneumatic power hammer to create a ball detail. Maynard forges a piece of flat steel into a taper that will become a ribbon element for a hand rail. A close-up of the flat steel on the forge



she moved in with Matt, started grad school at UK, and began working in the studio. Matt laughed. “It was like, ‘Move over, I’m coming in.’ Then there was no getting her out.” The couple later married, and Karine left grad school, less than a semester short of two graduate degrees, to focus on the studio.



Of course, Matt now realizes what a blessing their union has been. It was Karine who finally convinced Matt he is not simply a fabricator, but an artist. “I had a problem putting that label on myself,” he acknowledged.

Cramped studio limits business growth

For years the Maynards worked in the cramped 1,200-square-foot studio. It was hot — 120 degrees some days even with exhaust fans. Their projects, thanks in large part to Stough, were getting physically larger, with commissions for winding staircase railings.



“We were literally bumping up against the ceiling,” said Matt.

They realized their business could not grow without a larger studio so they consulted with the Small Business Development Center about business plans and bank loans. By 2012 they were moving into a 5,000-square-foot metal studio with 20-foot ceilings. It sits above the old studio, attached to their offices, across a gravel driveway from the restored farmhouse where they live. They own the property and several surrounding acres. They also now have permanent staff — two assistants in the studio and one in the office.



Business blossoms as bourbon booms

Many of their projects are for wealthy homeowners, and sometimes, because these people have multiple homes, one project leads to another.

Their business has also been fortunate to blossom as bourbon boomed. Work has come from Woodford Reserve, Maker’s Mark, Old Forester, Castle & Key, and Four Roses, bourbon makers that want to outfit



FORGING RELATIONSHIPS IN THEIR COMMUNITY

In addition to being award-winning metal artists and blacksmiths, Matt and Karine Maynard have also forged relationships in their community.

They helped organize a local arts group, which promotes Anderson County artists through an annual studio tour. They collaborate with a nearby sculpture park. And they support the local animal shelter, as evidenced by their adopted office cats.

The Anderson County Public Library is another beneficiary of their community spirit. Recently reopened after an expansion, the library's children's department entrance is graced by a replica of Anderson County's iconic railroad bridge at Tyrone, crafted by the Maynards, who donated their time and talents.

The Maynards also work closely with Melanie VanHouten, founder and executive director of Josephine Sculpture Park in nearby Frankfort.

VanHouten and Karine first met in Minnesota at Franconia Sculpture Park where VanHouten, a sculptor, was artist-in-residence and Karine was visiting while back home in her native Wisconsin. As the pair talked, they realized the Maynards' studio was only a few miles from VanHouten's family farm in Frankfort, which VanHouten planned to turn into a sculpture park.

"If you know Karine, you know she makes fast friends with everyone," said VanHouten. "She said, 'When you get back home to Kentucky, call me. We are going to connect.'"

The pair and their endeavors have been connected ever since. VanHouten has consulted with the May-



The Maynards host an open studio each November so visitors can watch the couple at work.

nards on projects that required casting, her area of expertise. She's made molds for their projects. When VanHouten has artists at the park who need more space or equipment she doesn't have, the Maynards happily welcome the artists to their place.

And each time the Maynards upgrade their equipment, VanHouten's park receives their old. "They are so generous with their time and talents and supportive with in-kind donations," said VanHouten. When another piece of the Maynards' old equipment arrived this summer, VanHouten exclaimed to Matt, "You have done so much for us; you've outfitted our whole studio. How can

you be any more wonderful?"

"He said, 'We believe in you, Mel,'" said VanHouten.

The Maynards also help promote their peers through the Art Trail, a day when several Anderson County artists open their studios. It is an expansion of an open studio day that their neighbor and friend, potter Marianne Brown, started many years ago.

Now backed by the Anderson County Arts Council, which Karine helped found, this year's Art Trail Open Studio will be from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 3. For more information, visit www.acartsky.org or www.facebook.com/acartsky.



A detail of a staircase shows the many facets such a work requires.

their properties with ironwork touches that seem appropriate for such a traditional business.

The Maynards' projects also have gotten larger and more time consuming. They recently completed a massive sculpture designed by a landscape architect for a Boston rooftop. In June, they wrapped up a six-month project making blackened steel elements for the new Old Forester Distilling Company in Louisville. They've come a long way from curtain rods.

Connecting with clients

A critical aspect of the Maynards' work is getting a sense of their clients, their goals, and their lifestyle. They travel to building sites, meet with home or business owners, and, typically, their architects and interior designers. One-of-kind-a-pieces are the result.

"What I love about them is they absolutely personalize their work," said Stough. "Nothing is stock; everything is custom. And they are extremely collaborative. This isn't the Matt and Karine Show. This is their interpretation, in iron, of what your vision is. They are not trying to impose their tastes on you."

"The bottom line," said Matt, "is we want to make things that bring people joy, whether it is our design, theirs, or a combination."



Balustrades are among the Maynards' most impressive works.



Each piece that the Maynards create is unique.

Division of labor

Blacksmithing is hard, physical work. Like her husband, Karine wears a bandana and work boots, jeans, and a T-shirt. "Karine puts her boots on and forges too," said Stough.

But there is more to their work than hammering metal. Ideas for designs and products spring from both, but each also offers specific expertise to their partnership.

Experience in the manufacturing industry has equipped Matt to do the exacting mathematical calculations required to ensure the pieces they make fit the spaces for which they are intended.

"Matt, coming from the machinist realm and with his love for accuracy and numbers, kind of fit right into that," said Karine. "It's kind of like the more complicated the better; bring it on, bring it on."



Says Karine: "Our roles are physically and intellectually challenging."

Karine specializes in the metal finishes jobs require, including gold leaf. She is also learning to blow glass so she can also make that aspect of the metal chandeliers they design.

In addition, they deal with the day-to-day chores of running their business — from managing employees to planning complicated installations of their work on rooftops or in New York City apartment buildings with narrow doors and small elevators. “Our roles are physically and intellectually challenging,” said Karine. And, she points out, as each project is unique, the challenges are always new. “Everything we’ve done, we’ve never done before,” she said.

Their friend Melanie VanHouten, founder of Josephine Sculpture Park in Frankfort and an artist too, understands the multiple demands. “Their work, in and of itself, is beyond compare; no one else is doing what they are doing and can do it as well. A lot of artists can be super creative, but to manage a business and be amazingly creative, that is a tough combination.”

Designing ironwork for entire spaces

Among the Maynards’ most visible works in Lexington is the Apiary, for which they spent a year making everything from garden gates and window grilles to chandeliers. Such all-encompassing projects seem to be their future.

“We are moving more and more toward entire spaces,” said Karine. “We are working on another commission, in South Carolina, that is almost as extensive as the Apiary. It’s such an honor to have someone want us to help define their space.”

Ultimately, all of their projects feed the Maynards’ need to create, said Matt. “You get to see things come to fruition that didn’t exist until you met someone and put your ideas together and put your hands on the metal and turned it into whatever it is. We put our soul and passion into it.” **KM**

NIGHTS BY THE FIRE INSPIRE HAND-FORGED COOKING TOOLS

As Matt and Karine Maynard sat next to a new fireplace built of salvaged stone in their kitchen last winter, they dreamed up a line of hand-forged tools for cooking over flames.

Their idea was sparked by the fireplace and by a commission from Gwyn Artz, now catering chef at Bayou Bluegrass Catering. Artz had asked the professional blacksmiths to make a fireplace poker and shovel for her boyfriend.

As often happens with the Maynards, one idea generated another. “Someone says, ‘Can you make this?’ and we say, ‘Yeah, and you know what else we can do?’ and the ideas kind of spin off,” said Matt.

Karine, who was less than a semester from a master’s in art history when she left school to devote her time to the couple’s studio, started reading about Colonial cooking.

The result of her research is a line of tools that so far includes a crane, a grill, a plancha (griddle), and an egg spoon. The couple used their fireplace as a laboratory, testing the tools to ensure they worked well and with ease. They added smart touches — a twirling grill and griddle so a cook can turn a steak or a Dutch oven for more even cooking, for example.

The tools have been shipped to chefs including Cooper Vaughan at the Apiary in Lexington and Newman Miller at Maker’s Mark distillery.

When Artz got her fireplace poker and shovel, the Maynards included an egg spoon, a nearly flat, small skillet on a long handle used to cook an egg over fire. Many chefs, including Alice Waters of Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California, rave about egg spoons.

Artz has become a fan. “There is something primal about cooking in this crazy spoon,” said Artz. “It’s like roasting a marshmallow on a stick.” And, she adds, it’s a way “to take art and make it useable.”

The fireplace tools bring Matt Maynard back to where he began as a blacksmith. At 12, he first tried his hand at the craft, working at a forge he built in his grandfather’s barn. His first piece was a poker, which he and Karine have.

They continue to think about ways to enhance time spent around the fire. What’s next? Maybe some tools for cooking over campfires, Karine thinks.

“It opens up a whole dimension,” said Matt. “Where does this go? We don’t know, but it’s fun.”



The Maynards are creating hand-forged cooking tools.