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If your home could use a little pizzazz, why not inject some flair into it with wares from Nelson artisans? **Vanessa Phillips** visits three of the region's craftspeople who love using their artistic talent to make a living.

PHOTOS MARION VAN DIJK

WONDERFUL WOOD

David Haig leads me to a rocking chair, inviting me to have a seat in the lounge of his charming Cable Bay cottage.

The chair is sculptural, sleek and smooth. It's not just any old rocking chair. It's a chair that plenty of people

around the world have tried to copy, yet all have failed.

It's a chair that has brought David, its creator, international acclaim, and it's a chair that has greatly helped sustain his career as a fine furniture maker based at his home and haven of 36 years - Tui Cottage.

"I've never made them anywhere except here (at Tui Cottage). They are a product of this place and our life here."

David moved to New Zealand from England in 1976. He'd "hightailed it" here after completing a history degree at Oxford University, where he'd met wife Clare.



Jobs in conservation, banking and antique furniture restoration followed until the early 1980s when David opened a furniture workshop in central Nelson.

By 1987 he'd had enough of travelling the Cable Bay road each day on his scooter so he borrowed \$20,000 and built a workshop at his cottage where he again set to work designing and crafting furniture such as dressing tables and chests.

He'd been making a "meagre living" crafting furniture, but it was in 1989 when, short of work, David experienced a breakthrough. David, Clare and their three sons had moved to Sydney for

a year, where David was doing stone work, helping build a friend's house in the Blue Mountains, when he came up with the design for his signature rocking chair. Back in Cable Bay, it took him three months to develop the first chair, which is made with steam bending of the wood.

During the past 26 years David has made 300 of the rocking chairs, sourcing and seasoning all the wood – such as sycamore, black or English walnut, or European ash – himself. He's sent the chairs to clients in a range of countries, from Italy, England and Germany to Norway, Holland and the United States of America, but Nelson remains an important market for David.

"Proportionally there's much more of my furniture in Nelson than anywhere else," he says.

"Nelson has got some lovely houses and very cultured people here who have been highly supportive.

"If you sold just in Nelson alone it would be difficult to make a living, but it's a great place to be based in.

"It still blows me away that people can choose from furniture from all around the world and when they come and pick you it's a real compliment."

Along the way David bought extra land from a neighbouring farmer to build another workshop and while he continues to make a range of contemporary furniture with traditional joinery, his rocking chair – which sells for around \$5000 plus GST - is a mainstay of his furniture making.

"They are a known quantity. It's a very unusual design, it's very skeletal, it's finely balanced.

"It's minimalist and it's a difficult thing to make," he says.

"There's a heck of a lot of handwork and polishing in every one. People say 'don't you get bored?' I guess my reply is it's something that I developed myself, it's a personal piece to me and like a boat builder or instrument maker you get good at making something and there's a pleasure in making it."

Although at times he's considered branching out into factory-made furniture, every time he's decided against it.

"I think the joy would go out of it for me... and I think my standards would be compromised.

"I'd lose interest. It's just not my nature. I'm not a mass producer."

