

Best Hunting

IN THE STATE

Food, sport and tradition define
hunting in the Sportsman's Paradise

**BY
CHRIS
HOLMES**

Hunting is inextricably woven into the wild fabric of Louisiana's heritage and culture. A harsh land when first settled, hunting was a necessity of subsistence as well as commerce. The wide diversity of habitat and abundance of game and birds provided a seemingly endless bounty of food for the table. With scant regulations in place and a voracious commercial demand for meat and hides, over-hunting sent many species into a major decline. However, with modernization of farming and food production practices came regulated hunting and concerted conservation programs that restored native species to sustainable levels. The abundance and variety of Louisiana's birds and game, combined with world-class fishing make the state a true sportsman's paradise.



Perched at the tip of the Mississippi flyway funnel, Louisiana is the stopping point for millions of ducks and geese on their annual fall migration. Though small in land mass, Louisiana boasts thousands upon thousands of varied wetlands habitat that provide food and rest for a wide variety of migrating waterfowl. Duck hunting is ingrained in the local population and is a bucket-list destination for waterfowl hunters from across the country. During the 2017-18 season, hunters in Louisiana bagged a whopping 1.08 million ducks statewide with a season average of 23.1 ducks per hunter. Unusually warm and wet weather patterns lowered those numbers last season. However, Louisiana still provides world-class duck and goose hunting in many areas of the state. Guided duck hunting operations are numerous and range in services from drive-up day hunting to luxurious lodges with 5-star amenities. Two of the top-tier waterfowl operations are Grosse Savanne near Lake Charles and Honey Brake Lodge near Jonesville. Both offer premier accommodations and excellent duck hunting opportunities.

The state also boasts over a million acres of public hunting access consisting of many state-owned Wildlife Management Areas, state and federal wildlife refuges, and national forests. Many of these areas contain suitable areas for waterfowl hunting. Two of the most productive properties are located near the mouth of the Mississippi River in Plaquemines Parish. Both are only accessible by boat and require navigating the lower reaches of the Mississippi River for access. Providing over 125,000 acres of prime hunting habitat, Pass-a-Loutre WMA and Delta National Wildlife Refuge are a waterfowl hunter's paradise.

Whitetail deer are the only big game species available for free-range hunting in Louisiana. The deer population was lowest between 1915 and 1925, with an all-time low estimate of 20,000 deer throughout the state. Large scale market hunting and decimation of habitat by large-scale timber cutting in

the late 1800s and early 1900s caused the decline. Deer management programs began in the late 1940s and well-regulated hunting seasons rebuilt the deer stocks which are estimated at over 500,000 today.

Giles Island sits in the Mississippi River between Louisiana and Mississippi. The property is intensely managed and produces trophy deer every year. This namesake guided hunting operation near Ferriday is extremely popular for those looking to bag a large southern whitetail buck.

Though they can be found throughout the state, larger trophy bucks generally come from the northern parishes and along the Mississippi River delta lands above Baton Rouge up to the northern border with Arkansas. The state has a lengthy season and generous bag limit allowing up to six deer per hunter depending on antler/antlerless regulations and specific areas. The vast areas

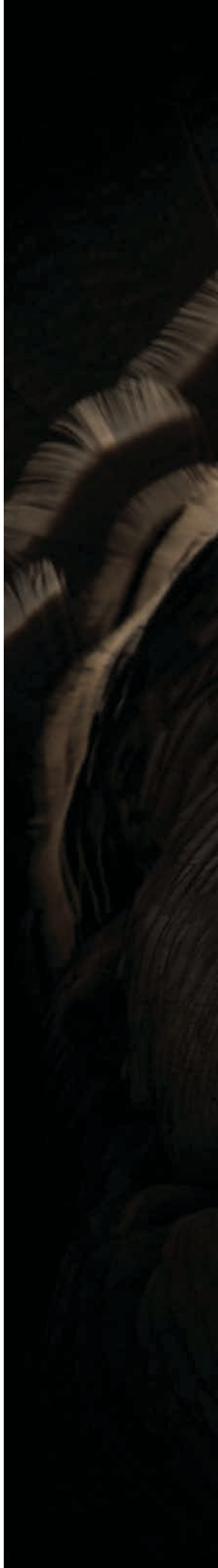
of public land mentioned above also provide great opportunities for successful deer hunting.

Feral hogs exist throughout the state and are considered an invasive species that compete with native game for food and habitat. Hunting is encouraged as a means of controlling the population. They provide great sport and excellent food quality. Hunting opportunities are year-round in many areas.

Although their numbers have declined somewhat in recent years, Louisiana still offers great opportunities to bag a wild turkey. A large majority of turkey hunters come from the ranks of successful deer hunters. While hunting whitetail deer is extremely challenging, turkey hunters took that up a notch. Those that paid their dues and honed their deer hunting skills over many years have added turkey to their hunting efforts for the extreme sport it provides. "Bird brained" is a misnomer when it comes to hunting turkey. Even the most skilled hunters

WHO KNEW?

Millennials get blamed for the decline of lots of things, like face-to-face conversation due to their embrace of social media and digital technology as their primary communication preference. However, as hunter numbers generally decline, that generation, as a segment, is responsible for a slow increase. Noted as being foodies, their primary reasons cited for taking up hunting are not the traditional outdoors experience, challenge or trophy seeking, but rather the opportunity to self-harvest local, sustainable, wild meat to foster their health-conscious lifestyle. Hunter recruiting organizations across the country are taking note and welcome them to the fold.





TURKEY REBUILDING SUCCESS

April kicks off the most challenging game Louisiana has to hunt. The wild turkey has senses that are second to none and successfully taking a mature bird is a great hunting accomplishment. Although there are no huntable populations across coastal Louisiana, prime turkey hunting areas are within a couple hours drive.

Due to low populations in the state, most of our parents and grandparents did not regularly pursue hunting turkeys. Therefore, it was not a tradition that many in Louisiana had passed down to them like deer and duck hunting.

Wild turkeys truly are a hunter/conservation success story. Unregulated hunting practices and subsistence hunting nearly eliminated the birds from the state in the early 1900s. Combined with heavy deforestation of prime habitat areas, the future for Louisiana's wild turkey was bleak. Peak estimates of up to one million birds in the 1800s was reduced to a mere 1,400 by the mid 1940s.

However, due to aggressive live trapping and restocking programs across the state, the wild turkey has made an amazing comeback in most areas of the state that have suitable habitat. Many areas now have an annual, well-regulated turkey hunting season. The National Wild Turkey Federation estimates Louisiana's current wild turkey population at 50,000 birds.

2020 LOUISIANA HUNTING SEASONS: TURKEY

AREA A April 4 – May 3 • **AREA B** April 4 – 26 • **AREA C** April 4 – 19
• **YOUTH AND PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED** March 28-29

2019-2020 LOUISIANA HUNTING SEASONS: DEER

AREA 1

Primitive Weapons
November 9 – 15
January 20 – 31

Modern Firearms/
still-hunt only
November 16 – December 6
January 6 – 19

With/without dogs
December 7 – January 5

AREA 2

Primitive Weapons
October 19 – 25
January 13 – 19

Modern Firearms/
still-hunt only
October 26 – December 3

With/without dogs
December 4 – January 12

AREA 3

Primitive Weapons
October 12 – 18
January 6 – 12

Modern Firearms/
still-hunt only
October 19 – December 1

With/without dogs
December 2 – January 5

AREA 4

Primitive Weapons
November 9 – 15
January 20 – 31

Modern Firearms/
still-hunt only
November 16 – December 6
January 6 – 19

With/without dogs
December 7 – January 5

AREA 5

Primitive Weapons
November 9 – 15 (either sex)
January 20 – 31 (bucks only)

Modern Firearms/
still-hunt only
(either sex)
November 16 – 17
November 29 – December 1
(bucks only)
November 18 – 28
December 2 – 6

With/without dogs
(either sex)
December 14 – 15
December 21 – 22
(bucks only)
December 7 – 13
December 16 – 20
December 23 – January 19

AREA 6

Primitive Weapons
November 9 – 15
January 20 – 31

Modern Firearms/
still-hunt only
November 16 – December 6

With/without dogs
December 7 – January 19

AREA 7

Primitive Weapons
October 12 – 18
January 6 – 12

Modern Firearms/
still-hunt only
October 19 – December 1

With/without dogs
December 2 – January 5

AREA 8

Primitive Weapons
October 12 – 18
January 6 – 12

Modern Firearms/
still-hunt only
October 19 – December 1

With/without dogs
December 2 – January 5

AREA 9

Primitive Weapons
(either sex)
November 9 – 15
(bucks only)
January 20 – 31

Modern Firearms/
still-hunt only
(either sex)
November 16 – 17
November 29 – December 1
(bucks only)
November 18 – 28
December 2 – 6

With/without dogs
(either sex)
December 14 – 15
December 21 – 22
(bucks only)
December 7 – 13
December 16 – 20
December 23 – January 19

AREA 10

Primitive Weapons
October 12 – 18
January 6 – 12

Modern Firearms/
still-hunt only
October 19 – January 5

ARCHERY

Areas 1, 2 & 4
October 1 – January 31

Area 3, 7, 8 & 10
September 21 – January 15

Areas 5, 6 & 9
October 1 – 15 (bucks only)
October 16 – February 15
(either sex)





CHAMPION DUCK DOGS

Duck hunting with the aid of a trusty retriever brings the sport to a new level. Hunting with one that has been professionally trained comes as close to having a remote-controlled dog as you can get. The bond becomes much more than a pet, but rather a trusted hunting partner. Joe and Tina Perron own Champion Retrievers just outside of Pineville. Their 50-acre technical training facility is known for producing some of the best retrievers in the country. Various retriever breeds are meticulously trained and polished for serious duck and goose hunting as well as hunt tests by the Hunting Retriever Club, Inc., American Kennel Club and the United Kennel Club. For summertime training, Joe utilizes a 400-acre facility in Bemidji, Minnesota where temperatures are much cooler. Taking a pup and training it to be its best is their mission. In addition to training, Champion also offers breeding services and has a reputation for producing multi-award winning retrievers. Whether a serious waterfowl enthusiast, or those looking for a hunt contest champion, duck dogs that pass through Champion Retrievers are always at the top of their class.

sometimes end up with their hat in their hand. Matching wits with a wild tom (male turkey) leads to ultimate satisfaction — or frustration. Locating, calling and tricking a wise old bird into shooting range is what keeps hunters waiting for those few days of the season each year.

Most turkey hunting is a do-it-yourself affair on public or private land as there are not many outfitters that offer guided Louisiana turkey hunts. One exception is Giles Island. Noted primarily for guided deer hunts, Giles Island also caters to turkey hunters.

Alligators are a unique species for hunting and Louisiana offers an out-of-the-ordinary hunting opportunity to bag a pre-historic beast that makes a great trophy and excellent table fare. The season lasts only one month and most hunters must use the aid of a licensed alligator hunter to hunt during the highly regulated season. However, Louisiana residents may apply for an annual lottery hunt drawing that provides three alligator tags to successful applicants for self-guided hunts on specific public lakes and Wildlife Management Areas. Lottery applications are announced in May for the September annual season. This year, hunters could apply for one of 47 locations across the state. The

2019-2020 LOUISIANA HUNTING SEASONS: TEAL

September 14 – 29

chances of getting drawn vary depending upon the number of tags available for a specific area and the number of applicants for the area.

Honey Brake, Grosse Savanne, and Giles Island all offer guided alligator hunts. Additionally, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries website has a contact list for alligator guides.

In addition to the species detailed above, Louisiana also offers small game hunting opportunities for rabbit, squirrel, coyotes and bobcat. Bird hunting for dove and quail is also popular. From the coastal marshes to the pine plantations of the northern end of the state, Louisiana's diverse habitat provides a variety of species for hunting which provide rich sport and delicious table fare. Hunting in Louisiana is not just a pastime, it is a passion.

Becoming an Outdoors Woman

Gain the basic skills, experience and confidence to hunt or fish independently.

While the total number of hunters in the country has generally declined, the number of women hunters has increased to where they now account for one-in-five, or 20 percent, of all hunters in the United States.

2019-2020 LOUISIANA HUNTING SEASONS: DUCKS

COASTAL ZONE

November 2 – 3 (youth only)
November 9 – December 8
December 21 – January 19

WEST ZONE

November 9 (youth only)
November 16 – December 8
December 21 – January 26
February 1 (youth only)

EAST ZONE

November 16 (youth only)
November 23 – December 8
December 14 – January 26
February 1 (youth only)



GET YOU A GATOR

Folks from across the country are mesmerized by the thought of actually going out and catching an alligator. Many do not believe that a lot of us live in such close proximity to these dangerous creatures. Of course, the History channel's reality TV show "Swamp People" brought the spectacle of alligator hunting to living rooms across the country. Do-it-yourself recreational opportunities for Louisiana residents to hunt alligators are limited to special lottery draw programs. However, residents and nonresidents can hire a commercial guide for a unique, thrilling experience that can only be had in a few states.

Alligators were once threatened with extinction and for many years, there was no hunting allowed. Thanks to strict management and a cooperative effort with the commercial industry, the population has been brought back to sustainable levels. For information on Louisiana resident alligator hunting or hiring an alligator hunting guide: wlf.louisiana.gov/wildlife/alligator-hunting

2019-2020 LOUISIANA HUNTING SEASONS: ALLIGATOR:

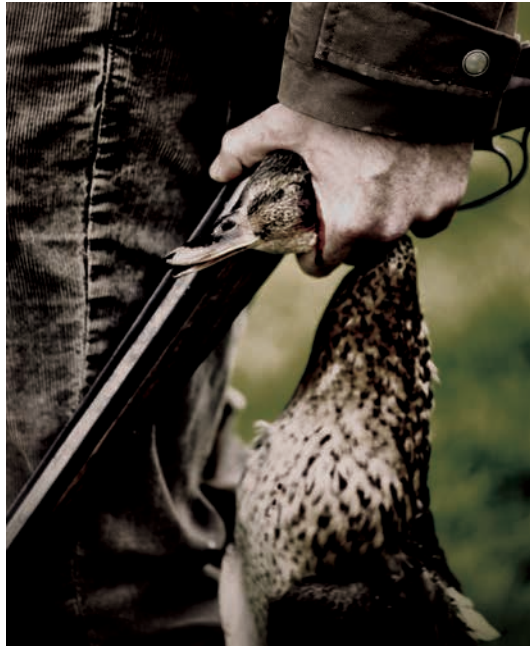
EAST ZONE

August 28 – September 26

WEST ZONE

September 4 – October 3

Alligator hunters must qualify for landowners tags or hunt with a licensed hunter/helper with available tags. Louisiana residents may also apply for special lottery area hunts awarded by random drawing.



There are several factors credited with the upswing in female hunters, one of which is the ability to put healthy, free-range, organic food on the table. Louisiana participates in the national BOW (Becoming an Outdoors-Woman) program and annually holds a weekend workshop that offers over 30 specialty courses designed to break down barriers to participation of women in outdoor activities, including hunting.

Participants may select from hunting-related courses such as live fire shotgun, rifle and handgun classes to turkey and deer management. Additional courses are available for beginning fly fishing and basic freshwater fishing. For those interested in the outdoors, but not hunting or fishing, they can choose to learn about outdoor photography, ecology, backpacking, outdoor cooking, kayaking and more.

This is a unique opportunity for women to gain the basic skills, experience and confidence to hunt or fish independently. The wildly popular program fills up quickly when applications become available in early January.

The Yentzen Story

Louisiana is steeped in duck hunting history. In the last six decades, duck hunting has seen monumental changes. The clothing

is highly advanced, surface drive motors have virtually replaced pirogues, motorized decoys and computer-designed shot shells all make up part of the modern duck hunter's gear. Duck calls have changed a lot also.

The calls of old were generally handmade with their barrels turned from wood stock or fashioned out of hollow canes. Reeds were metal or hand carved out of hard rubber. Today's mass-produced calls certainly work, but are mostly made of plastic and synthetic materials and have lost that intimate, homemade charm. That simple fact bodes well for the Yentzen duck call. The call was invented in the early 1950s by George Yentzen and his young protégé, James "Cowboy" Fernandez. Yentzen, a native of Donaldsonville grew up with the influences of south Louisiana's great waterfowl hunting legacy. A crude bandsaw, turning tools, and a lathe let Yentzen turn out duck calling works of art.

Yentzen's call was the first to use a "double reed" design. So unique, he obtained a patent and had the only such call for the 17-year life of the patent. Yentzen unfortunately died in 1958 and did not live long enough to realize what a revolutionary mark his invention would make in waterfowl hunting history. His protégé, Fernandez (recently deceased), took the call and made history on the duck calling contest scene. He racked up local, state, regional and national championships. In 1961 he was named the "Champion of Champions" duck caller.

The rich black-walnut wooden call is truly a classic design. You can taste the history packed into this call the second you put it to your lips. No cold, plastic toy feel. The wood taste will instantly evoke memories afield and it blows just as sweet and smooth as it always has. The original Yentzen double reed call is still available from Sure-Shot Game Calls. ■

2019-2020 LOUISIANA HUNTING SEASONS

DOVES

Mourning and White-winged doves and fully-dressed Eurasian Collared and Ringed Turtle-Doves

SOUTH ZONE

September 7 – September 15
October 12 – November 17
December 19 – January 31

NORTH ZONE

September 7 – September 29
October 12 – November 17
December 28 – January 26

GEESE

Snow, blue, Ross's and whitefronted geese
November 2 – December 8
December 21 – February 9

2019-2020 LOUISIANA HUNTING SEASONS

RABBIT October 5 – February – 29 • **SQUIRREL** October 5 – February 29, May 2-24 • **QUAIL** November 16 – February 29



Artfully Loaded

Louisiana gunsmiths,
stockmakers and
engravers turn
firearms into fine art

It's no surprise that in a state that brands itself "Sportsman's Paradise," the art and craft of fine firearms is very much alive and well. Our neighbors include stockmakers, metalsmiths, engravers and restorers, several of whom are working at such a high level that collectors and enthusiasts from around the country have taken note.

"I work for people in New Jersey, I work for people in Pennsylvania, Florida, Texas... all over the place," says Delhi-based gunsmith David Christman, Jr., who, like most fine arms craftspeople, designs exclusively on a custom basis, working directly with clients to bring their vision to life.

"There's just something about fine firearms," says Christman. "There's a niche for everybody. You may like one kind or another. You may like the process of building them, you may like to just look at them. But there's something — some style or some element — that really can appease anyone."

by MEGAN ROMER photographs by GREG MILES

B

aton Rouge's Layne Zuelke, a certified master engraver with the Firearms Engravers Guild of America, says that the creative vision itself is often part of the customer's request.

"Most people who are buying the level of work that I do, they generally just turn a gun over to me and

let me run with it," says Zuelke. "They'll give me a budget. Sometimes they'll give me a theme that they might want, maybe scrollwork from a certain period; they might want gold inlay or something like that, and then I'll just go with that. But mostly everything comes out of my head."

Zuelke initially trained as a jeweler beginning at age 17, and while he still does some jewelry work, his interest in engraving firearms took precedence early on. Part of this was his attraction to working with steel, a much harder metal than silver, gold or other standard metals used in jewelry.

"Steel is much harder to cut, obviously," he says. "Silver and things like that are really soft. So the techniques are a little different with steel. You can't just use a push graver in steel — you have to use a hammer and chisel or a pneumatic graver."

Steel is not only physically hard, but it's unforgiving. Unlike gold, where a little heat or pressure can smudge things back into place, once you cut steel, there's no going back.

"There's no room for mistakes," says Zuelke. "There's some tricks we've got to fix an errant line, but for the most part, you don't make mistakes. You need to be confident enough in what you're doing to know that you're not going to mess up."

This level of difficulty in craftsmanship is part of why there are so few people actually doing this work — the Firearms Engravers Guild of America only has around 50 master engravers on its rolls — and the difficulty and scarcity of the art form mean the price tag is astonishingly hefty. Zuelke's objets d'art can sell for upwards of \$30,000 and he's not hurting for work, but he's humble about it.

"Most of [my clients] find me through social media or the internet," he says. "I don't advertise, so it's just word of mouth."

Even with five-figure price tags on his pieces, Zuelke encourages his clients to use the guns now and again, advising, "Please don't just put this in a safe or put it on the wall, go shoot it." He is clear that his engraving does not affect the utility of the gun, and keeping the weapon in good working order is, in fact, part of what adds to the difficulty of the craft (and thus, to exacting craftsmen like Zuelke, the appeal).

"I've said that I think that engraving is one of the highest forms of art," he says. "The reason behind that is that as a gun engraver, I'm combining four different skills to create something: I'm an artist first. I have to be able to get down on paper, y'know, my vision. I have to be a gunsmith second, because I've gotta be





able to work on that gun — disassemble it ... I've gotta be a metalsmith next, because the gun as it comes from the factory is usually not clean enough for me to engrave, so I've got to refine the gun: sand it out, polish it. And then I've got to be an engraver fourth. So combining all of these things into one art — it's not easy. If it was easy, everyone would do it."

C

ovington-based Sam Alfano works with jewelry, knives, tools and even coins, but it was firearm engraving that first caught his eye.

"My father was a firearms enthusiast and he had lots of magazines and books with pictures of firearms and I was always fascinated by that," he

says. "And I was an artsy kid anyway, so it was just something I pursued because of my interest in art. I got my first set of engraving tools from a mail-order catalog in the early 1970s and I didn't know how to use them. And I struggled with them for about 10 years before a book came out that explained how to sharpen the tools and how to use them.

"Once I got that book, I was off and running and it was at that point that I started calling myself an engraver because I could actually engrave something. A couple of years after that is when I was employed by the New Orleans Arms Company and I worked there for seven years as a gun engraver."

At the now-shuttered New Orleans Arms Company, Alfano studied under Lynton McKenzie, a legend of firearms engraving.

"Working with Lynton, that was like hitting the lottery for me," says Alfano. "This was the first time I had been able to receive any instruction. Prior to that I was just self-taught."



Like Layne Zuelke (one of the many engravers Alfano has taught), Alfano is attracted to firearms engraving in large part because of the technical demands.

"If it was easy, everybody would be an engraver," he says. "It's a very demanding, exacting art form. It's certainly not for everyone. It takes a special kind of person to be able to spend days on end working on something the size of a pack of matches or a cigarette package. You put a lot of sweat and blood into something that's very, very small."

Alfano was recently named a grand master by the Firearms Engravers Guild of America, making him one of only a handful of craftsmen recognized at this level. Rather than lock himself away in a studio, Alfano uses this designation (and the skills that led him to acquire it) as an opportunity to teach and pass on this dying art to a new generation. He teaches workshops regularly at the GRS training center in Kansas and also offers private instruction in his own studio. Despite being a bit of a traditionalist himself, Alfano is not a stick-in-the-mud; he encourages his students to find their own artistic voices and is altogether delighted by some of the things he's seeing.

"We've got some younger engravers that are engraving watches, particularly," he says. "They're doing more modern design. I'm a traditionalist: I like the more classic scrollwork and designs that are more timeless. But a lot of the younger guys are engraving skulls and tattoo-type designs and doing a beautiful job of it! And they're very popular.

"So yeah, the trend is changing from some of the old-school stuff to some newer cutting-edge designs. These



younger guys are really thinking out of the box. They're influenced by tattoo art a lot and they're incorporating that into high-end engraving jobs. They're really doing quite well at it."

Alfano, almost always in teacher mode, encourages young artists to try out engraving, but suggests that they do not attempt the self-taught route that he struggled with.

"If someone is interested in learning the art of hand-engraving, the best advice I would give them is to take a class," says Alfano. "If you take a class, you can avoid years of trial and error. You can get in the game much quicker. And when you have a master that's instructing you, they can help you over the hurdles and the pitfalls."

The second piece of advice he offers is to hone your art skills.

"What you engrave is only as good as what you design," says Alfano. "The best engravers are also accomplished artists. If you can't draw a good design, then chances are you won't be able to engrave one. I mean, you can use patterns from pattern books and that's fine. That's fine for the hobbyist. But if you really want to excel in the art, and have full flexibility as far as being able to do different shapes and design different objects, take a class and learn how to draw."

U

p in North Louisiana, David Christman found a different element of guns to fall in love with.

"Those big military weapons, I don't like them," says Christman. "I don't like handguns. I've got one, but I don't like it. I don't

even like shotguns. I like rifles."

Christman is a hunting enthusiast who got into gunmaking in his 30s. What attracted him?

"I was too poor to buy a factory gun, so I built one," he says. "That's the truth! Necessity is the mother of invention. Life's too short to hunt with an ugly gun. You know, I tell guys, 'when you're sitting out there in your deer stand, you're gonna look at your gun a whole lot more than you're gonna look at the deer!'"

He sees something important and even a bit poetic about the wooden stocks that he builds.

"I think the word I want is 'warmth,'" he says. "There's just something so different about holding a wooden stock and a synthetic stock. It's the feeling itself, that's what you get out of 'em. And you should have wood in the woods."

Christman starts as most craftspeople who work with wood do: with a nice wood blank. He prefers English walnut ("it's just the prettiest"), but will work with whatever wood his client requests.

"From there, I whittle it, if you will, until it's a stock," says Christman. Harkening to Michelangelo's famous philosophy that his works of art were already in the marble, he just had to chisel away the superfluous material. He laughs in agreement with the comparison. "Yep, that's the same thing. Somewhere down in there is the stock you're looking for."



Christman prefers a clean, classic look to the stocks he builds, emphasizing the natural beauty of the wood and embellishing only very simply using checkering techniques. He does not begrudge other gunsmiths their own aesthetics, but makes it clear that the customer should really consider the specialties of the gunsmith when ordering custom weapons.

"I like the classic style," he says. "I've got other styles I can do. I'm not crazy about it. This is a place where the customer makes a mistake: he sees a thing that the guy down the road has, and he likes it, so he comes up to me and says 'I want one just like that.' Well, I don't do that. I excel at this."

If Christman's interpretation of "this" is what you want — be ready to wait. He builds only one custom gun per year nowadays, and has a few in the hopper. He does basic gunsmithing as well — replacing barrels, adding Cerakote (a ceramic coating that makes guns "just about totally impervious to anything a human or the elements can do to it) — but the high-craft, made-from-scratch weapons are a one-a-year deal for him. ■

