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Artisan Leaf

By Ivy Rutledge

Golden tobacco leaves shimmer on tabletops and wood panels in the Artisan Leaf showroom, where part-owner Reggie Harrison describes their distinctive style: "I always compare it to being like snowflakes. No two are alike." Each piece the company produces is a unique combination of leaf variety, color, pattern, texture and finish.

Sebastian Correa, one of Harrison's partners, who specializes in production and online presence, arranges the leaves on a wood surface before applying an epoxy to create a matte or glossy finish. Correa says the flue-cured leaves are his favorite to work with and constitute 75 percent of their products.



"The flue-cured offer more variety, where the burley and the cigar leaves are more set in their colors," he says. "The flue-cured vary more from yellow to orange, so we have more options."

From farm to finish, the artistry is in the details. Before leaves can be used, they must be steamed and ironed, a labor-intensive process. George Newsome, the owner of a tobacco distribution company in Wilson, North Carolina, helps keep Artisan in steady supply of the perfect leaves. Newsome places orders by color to save time on the creative end and aims to develop a process to flatten out the leaves before they



are stored. "It's like having paint ready on demand," he says. "Correa can pull from his orange pile and pull from his lemon pile."

The idea for Artisan Leaf came about in 2012 when Newsome hired Louis Thorpe to design a bar as part of a remodel of the sample room in his distribution company. Inspired by the leaves, Thorpe played with a handful and came up with a stunning piece that set the wheels in motion. Correa saw the business potential, and by the fall of 2014, the four had formed a company. One of their first customers was a local restaurant, Jac's Grill.

In 2014, Artisan Leaf ordered about 200 pounds of tobacco leaves. In 2015, the number rose to 1,000. In 2016, they expect that number to approach 3,000. This

spring, business is robust. Individually finished leaves and coaster sets do well in local gift shops. The company also makes custom frames, bars and panels.

The panels are their main focus, Harrison says, because they can be cut and shaped into pieces and used in different ways. Custom pieces for businesses and organizations create a decor that connects to the area's deep tobacco heritage.

In February, Artisan Leaf installed tabletops, wall paneling and two bars for a North Carolina steakhouse. Newsome says customers often come in with their own ideas, and that spirit of experimentation has been the theme for Artisan Leaf as it has grown.

Since 2014, the company has grown beyond North Carolina, with new installations in Kentucky and Alabama. In Alabama, Artisan Leaf

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installed the bar and tables in Huntsville's top-rated Vintage Cigar Lounge, and in Kentucky they arranged a set of panels in a grid with dark mahogany, creating a prominent lobby display.

"What has been interesting is a lot of people from this area have ties to tobacco, one way or the other, whether it's direct or through a grandmother or an uncle who grew up on a farm, so they have an affinity for it," Harrison says. "But the thing that's cool about it is that it has a universal appeal because of its look and natural aspect."

For more information, visit www.artisanleaf.com or call (252) 230-5548.



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