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SOLID CHOICES



From the geometric adornments of the Arts and Crafts movement to the hand-turned simplicity of a Shaker table, the pieces at Chilton Furniture Co. are built to last a lifetime

Jen Levin believes in slow decor. “I think style should evolve over time,” she says. “The best way to design a space is through collecting pieces over the course of a lifetime and mixing them relentlessly.”

Jen’s ethos is visible throughout the Chilton Furniture Co. store in Freeport, where cherry tables and ash chairs play with minimalist Japanese-designed ceramics, cozy Beni Ourain rugs, and abstract paintings by artist Scott Bowe. The visual language of the showroom may sound eclectic, but it’s grounded by Chilton’s primary product: Shaker-inspired and heirloom-quality solid wood furniture.

Like Jen’s design style, this furniture is made slowly and thoughtfully. Since purchasing the company in 2014, Jen and her husband, Jared, have been working with craftspeople to produce more and more products in Maine. They do this in part to honor the company’s history—Chilton has been selling wood furniture since the mid-1970s—but also because the Levins firmly believe in buying local. “I think when you buy pieces that are crafted by regional artists, you root your house in the local economy and in the community,” Jen says. “I’m part of the Maine community, and that’s why I’m eating at a table that was made just down the road.”

The tables, chairs, dressers, beds, end tables, and shelves on display at Chilton pay homage to the company’s history through simple, clean design principles. While Chilton does not manufacture furniture—the Levins work directly with craftspeople to design and sell pieces, rather than building them in-house—their curated collection is unified by quality construction and a minimalist aesthetic. In short, Chilton pieces are built to last—and to weather both shifts in style and the temperamental Maine climate. As temperature and humidity changes, wood contracts and expands, “almost like a living thing,” says Jen.



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1. Jared and Jen Levin of Chilton Furniture Co. pose with the Hygge dining table in ambrosia maple. Jen sits on a maple Hygge-style Tappan chair with a taped back in butternut. The painting is by Scott Bowe.

2. At the Chilton showroom in Freeport, cherry Tappan three-slat chairs with hunter-colored tape are pulled up to the Abbotts Mill dining table, also in cherry. On the right is the Hygge dining table.

3. Every Acadia bed is one-of-a-kind, thanks to its live-edge headboard. On the Acadia nightstand are walnut Shaker boxes and a Monohanako vase. The lamp is from Hubbardton Forge, and the orange pillow is by Erin Flett.

4. The Farmington Cottage stools come in four colors: summer green, tangerine, summer blue, and white.



The maple Mysa sleigh bed and nightstand are made in the midcoast. The photograph above the dresser is by Christopher Lawrence, and the pair of paintings is by Charles Mooradian.

Chilton employs traditional techniques, like dovetail, bridle, mortise and tenon, and other types of wood joinery whenever possible, particularly in key structural locations. While many of their pieces use some metal fasteners, which makes them easier to assemble and reassemble, the Levins are slowly growing a collection of all-wood furniture. “One of our woodworkers told me that when you have metal and wood together, over time, metal will always win. The joints will loosen, and where the metal rubs against the wood, it will degrade,” Jen explains. “With a properly constructed wood-on-wood joint, there is no reason for that to ever weaken.”

Jen’s passion is for offering unique products that will last generations. She relays an anecdote from one of the craftspeople that Chilton works with: Years ago, Adam Nudd-Homeyer, owner and builder of the highly prized Tappan chair, was tasked with fixing one of the handcrafted ash and maple chairs that had been doubling as a ladder in an old house in Sandwich, New Hampshire. “But he couldn’t take it apart to repair it,” she says. “The joints were too solid.” The Levins say that these Tappan chairs are among the best quality chair of this style on the market, and they are actively working with Nudd-Homeyer to innovate new versions that reflect Chilton’s evolving aesthetic.

While Chilton still sells chairs that are indistinguishable from their nineteenth-century counterparts, Jen and Jared are working

to bring a slightly more modern aesthetic into their showroom. “For many years, Chilton has been about the Shaker philosophy, which is about utility, quality, and simplicity,” Jen says. “We want to stay true to those principles while introducing some exciting, original designs.” To that end, the Levins are pursuing a collaborative partnership with Sea Bags to create unique beds featuring weathered sailcloth headboards. They have also hired Barrett Stowell, a Maine-born industrial and interior designer currently living in Boston, to help develop more complex pieces, including the geometric Lokie tables and bench, available in ash and oak, as well as the solid maple Mysa sleigh bed and its coordinating Mysa nightstand.

“It will be interesting to see how the more modern items we’re making resonate with our more traditional customers,” Jen says. However, she feels that even shoppers with a classic design sense will be able to appreciate the clean lines of Chilton furniture—whether it comes in the form of a classic Shaker chest of drawers made of cherry or a midcentury-inspired wormy maple dining table. “We’re evolving,” Jen says. “And that’s a good thing.” **MH+D**

4 STYLING TIPS FOR SLOW DECOR:

► Invest in anchor pieces that will last a lifetime, then mix it up with seasonal accessories. "I prefer to work with neutrals, and add color in accessories," Jen says. "I love changing the feel of my space as the temperature rises and falls." Pillows, placemats, and flowers are all easy to swap out.

► "Buy the best quality furniture you can afford," says Jen. "You will enjoy a piece longer if it is built to last. I always tell people to examine a piece and look for certain quality cues, such as dovetails on the drawer boxes or split wedge mortise-and-tenon joints where spindles are visible through the top rail of a chair." Look to see whether the wood in the furniture appears as though it all comes from the same tree. "This means more time was taken to select the wood that went into building the piece—it probably means more care was taken in the construction as well," Jen says.

► Don't be afraid to mix and match wood types. Often, Jen says, customers will express trepidation about mixing various types of wood. "I think wood almost always goes with wood," she says. However, there is one exception to this rule: don't choose pieces that are too similar in shade. "I find a duochromatic palate is easier to decorate with. I love mixing walnut and maple, or walnut and birch. It makes the space feel crisp," she says.

► Finally, don't be afraid to get up close and personal with the grain. Some of the most striking pieces in the Chilton showroom feature irregular grain patterns, such as the dark streaks of spalted maple or the distinctive trails of worm-gnawed maple. "I like to advocate for wood in its natural state," explains Jen. "I think people are drawn easily to the grain of the wood—it's what makes each piece unique, and that makes it even more beautiful."

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