

Briar Root Pipe Making

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For several years, I have been a growing fan in the art of pipe smoking. Being that my pipes are great conversational pieces, I have often felt that I should be prepared to explain history, methods of manufacturing processes, and proper techniques of pipe smoking for no more reason than to impress people with curious knowledge; after all, pipe smokers have a reputation of being philosophers, thinkers, and educators.

My interests in the wood properties of Briar root pipes have been encouraged by the challenge of carving my own, as well as having appreciation of the one's that I have purchased. Speaking from experience, every pipe that I have owned, including those of similar shape and style, have had a different flavor, but I have never completely understood why. I assumed that length and curve of stem and diameter of bowl was the major factor, but as I have come to find out there are other factors in manufacturing, care, and upkeep which play a bigger cause.

Briarwood is the best material for pipes, because of its cool smoking quality and durability. Prior to Briar pipes, the most popular materials were clay and any other type of hardwood, such as Cherry-wood. Clay pipes were too fragile and broke easily, and other wood pipes ended up in smoke along with the tobacco smoked in them. Discovered around the 1850's, Briar root has remained the most popular wood for pipe making ever since.

A Briar pipe begins as a "burl" or growth on the root system of the White Heath tree, a shrub-like plant which grows primarily in the dry, arid, rocky wastelands around the Mediterranean Sea. The name briar comes from the French word "bruyere" which means heath root. Of all woods, the Briar burl is unique for making pipes because it's tough, porous, and nearly impervious to heat. Burls for fine quality pipes can often be fifty to a hundred years old when harvested for pipe making.

When harvested, Briar contains considerable moisture, sap, and resin. The ebauchons and plates are boiled in water for several hours to remove much of the sap and resin. This is followed by long periods of drying (up to two years) so that all traces of moisture are moved from the wood. This careful "curing and aging" process is of the

utmost importance in bringing out the finest smoking qualities of a Briar pipe. It allows the pipe to "breathe," to absorb moisture and oil from the tobacco, assuring a cool, dry smoke.

Once the curing process is completed, the Briar is ready to be shaped into pipe bowls. A variety of hand and machine operations are necessary to complete this shaping process. Generally, the more handwork that goes into carving a pipe, the higher the price will be. The seasoned root is then sawn into blanks and then it is turned in two stages on a lathe to produce the interior of the bowl and the start of the external outline. The rest of the shaping is done by hand and by holding the machined blank against various rotating cutting and sanding tools to remove the soft and cracked portions, leaving only close-grained, extremely hard Briar wood. Remaining Briar is then rough-cut into small blocks, called "ebauchons," in sizes and shapes suitable for fashioning into standard shape pipes. Some particularly fine grained Briar is left uncut in larger pieces called "plates" which are used for larger freehand pipes.

Following this initial shaping the grading procedures begin; the better quality pipes going on to be pre-carbonized. This involves using a gas heated metal tool to turn the inner layer of the bowl to carbon to assist in 'breaking in' a new pipe.

The next stage is to choose and fit a stem and final sand both parts of the pipe together, to ensure a perfect transition at the joint. An aluminum condenser/filter can be fitted at this stage or on larger pipes the 9mm charcoal cartridge can be substituted if requested.

Due to the inconsistencies of nature and the conditions under which Briar grows, only a small percentage of the thousands of pipes produced each year will have a uniformly fine grain pattern and perfection of finish upon which a manufacturer will stamp his name. These "perfect" pipes, which may cost \$100.00 or more, are sometimes called "firsts." Pipes of the highest quality will have very old briar, anywhere from seventy-five to over a hundred year old wood. First, the older the briar the better a pipe will smoke, because the wood has a high level of porosity providing a cooler smoke. When a pipe smokes cool, it allows the smoker to taste the tobacco better. Second, the age of the Briar allows the smoker to cure "break-in," the pipe with ease when it is new.

Third, the high level of porosity makes the pipe lighter in weight so it does not cause a sore jaw while holding the pipe in one's mouth.

The remaining Briar pipes may have tiny, natural surface flaws or sandpits, some of which are almost undetectable, some of which are large enough to warrant putty fills. While these tiny surface imperfections affect the aesthetic appearance of the pipe, they have absolutely no effect on its smoking qualities. These pipes, often referred to as "seconds," are sold at more reasonable prices, under numerous brand names, and represent the very best purchase values. The quality selection will range anywhere from twenty-five to fifty year old Briar.

Other bowls may be selected to be sand blasted or carved to create a rugged, pleasingly rough texture.

Briar pipes are available in a wide variety of standard shapes which extends over a hundred. Briar pipes are also available in unique, one-of-a-kind "freehand" shapes. These pipes follow no particular shape, but are carved according to the grain and size of the Briar. Briar pipes are finished in three kinds of finishes: smooth, rough, and a combination of the two. In a smooth finish pipe, the three most popular grain patterns are straight, flame, and horizontal patterns. The rarest and most expensive pattern is the straight grain finish. This type of finish suggests that the briar is in excellent aesthetic condition, the wood has a tight 90 degree grain going in vertical position. Both the top and the bottom have a birds-eye grain that adds to the beauty and uniqueness of the pipe. Straight grain pipes are very rare, hand made, and are the most desired by pipe collectors.

The flame grain pipe is similar as a straight, but the grain widens in a pattern that creates the illusion of a flame, thus its given name. The flame grain is considered just as beautiful as the straight, because no two patterns are ever alike. The horizontal finish pipe has a grain that loops around the pipe usually widening into a flame finish, or it goes into different angles.

The grain helps to insulate heat; it also disperses heat through the pipe not permitting it to concentrate in one spot. Any smooth pipe that lacks grain of any kind should be discarded, because they do not allow proper heat dispersion, making pipe smoking a miserable experience. Regardless of the grain pattern, the most important factor to look for when choosing a pipe is the high level of grain. The more grain a pipe

has, the older the briar. The grain allows the smoker to determine the age of the briar the same way a tree's age is determined by the trunk's rings.

Finishing is done using rotary sanders and high speed cloth mops if a smooth finish is to be applied. Traditional alcohol based stains are applied by hand and rubbed in to enhance the grain. The colors, ranging from transparent natural to an antique black, are clearly shown on the color page. The finishing coat is rubbed on and buffed to a high gloss finish.

Equally beautiful are pipes with a rough finish. Rough finish pipes are not flawed Briars, nor are they a means to cover up any imperfections. A rough finish is given to a pipe when the quality of the Briar is superb, but the aesthetic quality does not meet the standards of the maker. The briar may have too many sandpits, uneven textures, or superficial holes, by carving them out either by hand or sandblasting the wood, these imperfections are removed allowing the Briar to retain its smoking qualities. Because the grain-look is lost in this process, the pipe cost goes down, but not the quality.

The individual craftsmanship that is displayed in each pipe certainly directly influences both performance and beauty as proper drilling, carving, and balance are essential to overall smoking enjoyment. Care must be given to how the draft hole is drilled, the uniformity of the bowl, the thickness of the wall, the balance of the stem, the exploitation of the individual grain, and so on. Each facet of the carving process can either make or break the final pipe and imperfections such as sand pits can arise at any point.

The pipe should feel comfortable in one's hand. A lightweight pipe is well-aged and cured and will offer a good-tasting, cool smoke. It is not recommended that one uses any kind of filter or condensing system. Their systems trap bitter moisture in the shank of a pipe and prevent the effective use of the pipe cleaners during the smoke.

"Breaking in" a new pipe simply means developing a thin layer of carbon or "cake" on the inside wall and in the heel or bottom of the bowl. The carbon cake acts like a grate in a fireplace to improve the draft and ensure complete combustion. It also serves as a barrier between the burning tobacco and the bare wood. Many pipes are pre-carbonized to assist pipe smokers in the "bread-in" process.

There are several methods of breaking in a new pipe. It is recommended that one starts with a full bowl of tobacco. The most important thing is to smoke the tobacco all the way to the bottom slowly. Tamp and re-light as often as necessary and don't be afraid of using too many matches. If a pipe gets too hot, it should rest awhile before being tamped and re-lit. A test to see if a pipe is too hot can be done by placing it against one's cheek. If it is uncomfortably hot, it should be set aside and allowed to cool.

When cleaning a new pipe, pipe cleaners should be used frequently but cautiously. Running them all the way down into the bowl may peel away the new cake before it has a chance to set.

A pipe should rest at least a full day after smoking it, giving the accumulated oil and moisture a chance to dry out. After cleaning a pipe, it's a good idea to leave a pipe cleaner in the stem and shank to absorb excess moisture. The pipe should also be set at a proper drainage angle, with the bowl lower than the stem. A dry pipe smokes cooler and sweeter.

Rotating pipes is a good idea to allow each pipe a chance to completely dry out. If a pipe begins to taste harsh or bitter, it can be rejuvenated at a modest cost by boiling alcohol into the shank, removing excess build up, shaping the cake properly, refinishing the bit like new and then waxing the entire pipe.

As can be seen, pipe smoking is a science both in creation and in use, and is not as easy as grabbing a chunk of wood and throwing it on a lathe, although, with a little time, patience and useful hints, I think it would still be fun to try. Of course, I have every intention of it! Use and history are topics that I haven't been able to go into much detail with, but I can tell through finding resources that are ones just as fascinating as I have found Briar root pipe making to be.

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