

Cedar Sanctuary

—Victoria Wood Studio

MORE THAN TWO decades of cooking in celebrated West Coast kitchens has given Diewertje von Aesch a unique perspective on furniture design. When she started drawing up her first dining set, the chef-turned-woodworker considered how the conversation would flow around the table. A lover of a leisurely meal, she pictured diners sitting in her chairs for hours, and she wanted them to be comfortable. Just as she did as a chef, she wanted to facilitate memorable dining experiences as a designer.

Diewertje (Dita for short) and her wife, Frances von Aesch, run Victoria Wood Studio out of their historic home in the heart of Victoria's artsy Fernwood neighbourhood. In their charming yard, Dita takes a seat at her timeless indoor-outdoor table. "I designed the low back on the chair so you can turn this way and that way instead of being locked into one position. It encourages conversation," she explains. "The long, narrow table creates a social environment. You can push your chair out from the table and still be close to your friends; it's comfortable and intimate. That's what makes a really good dining experience—it's the food and the wine, but it's also how the table is designed." The set, which offers a bench option, makes a seamless transition from the patio to the dining room and is ideal for small living spaces.

Dita and Frances met while working together at a Vancouver restaurant in the 1980s. They later moved to Victoria and, a decade ago, Dita was inspired to trade her knives for a different set of sharp tools. "I wanted to do something more permanent than food, and I wanted to do something refined, something high-craft," recalls Dita, who designs and builds while Frances manages the business. "It's interesting how wine and food and woodworking go together. It's all about making something beautiful, enjoying something beautiful." Frances, also a sommelier at award-winning Italian restaurant Zambri's, adds: "The people who like the type of wine we like tend to like the design sense that we put forward, which, to simplify, is Old World and European in its background, but with a modern edge: Dutch-born, West Coast-built."

Perhaps the finest example of the couple's aesthetic is the 15-foot Infinity Bench that snakes along the boulevard by their home. A similar bench sat outside Zambri's before being purchased by the Resort Municipality of Whistler. Other products include birdhouses, bike boxes (designed to hold a bottle of wine, naturally), and laundry racks worthy of the finest linens. "All of my work is about relationship to the exterior," says Dita. "Designed, stained,



joined, and built for the outdoors, but stylish enough to be used inside." It's in the past three years that the von Aeschs have ventured into furniture and other products. The company's original tagline was "fine gates and passageways", and the focus was on sophisticated structures and intricate installations, which they still do. Dita's first project was the passageway into her yard, a gable gate with a peak that mirrors that of the 1889 Queen Anne-style house and transitions visitors from the street to the sanctuary. "The passageway is the poetry," Dita explains. "It's all about slowing down and coming home." Frances adds: "It's the perfect entry way to our business. You can literally walk through what we do."

Everything is designed and built by Dita in her 300-square-foot basement workshop. All products are made in small batches, on spec, or on demand, and Dita hand-selects her materials—FSC-Certified British Columbia western red cedar—from the mill. "We have the best cedar in the world right here on Vancouver Island," she says. "I have a real appreciation for the local wood. It's gorgeous." This past summer, the couple began opening up their secret garden to the public as a showroom. It's the perfect venue for Dita's work, which beautifully interacts with the elements while inviting human connection. "This is our home, our workshop, our studio, and our store. Here is the heart of us," says Frances. "I wake up in the morning and the whole house smells of cedar. The little hum I hear from [Dita's] machines is a very comforting sound. It's the sound of someone happily doing what they love."

—Raina Delisle

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