

# Soap Flakes

If you're looking for a finish that's easy to apply, doesn't yellow the wood and is completely safe to use, this may be just what you're after.



BY REED HANSULD

I first learned of a pure soap flake finish from a Danish fellow who I was sharing studio space with as an artist in residence at the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship, in Maine. He said it was a traditional finish used by the Danes for everything from dining chairs and tables to case goods. He went on to describe how once a year the home-maker would warm a pot of water on the stove and scrub all of the furniture down with this mixture. The process would remove the dirt, grease and grime that had built up over the course of the

year. The result was furniture as clean and white as the day it first entered the home.

## Clean and Safe

I was skeptical at first, but when he finished applying it to a cabinet I was convinced it was something I needed to try for myself. In this age of “green solutions”, this is as environmentally friendly a finish as one will ever find. It consists of nothing more than pure soap flakes and water. This means I don't need to wear a respirator, gloves, glasses, or apply it in a spray booth because it has zero VOCs.

The only North American source I know of is [www.msodistributing.com](http://www.msodistributing.com). The process of mixing is simple. There are no hard and fast rules for the right mixture, but in my case I filled the bottom of a mixing bowl with 1/4”–1/2” of water, and threw in a moderate handful of soap flakes. I then whisked it for about five minutes with a fork chucked in a drill. The consistency for initial applications was a thick froth, similar to home-made whipping cream. [Photo 1]

Once it was mixed, I used a clean white cotton rag and applied the soap by scooping up froth and rubbing it into the wood. I applied the froth to the work thoroughly

Photos by Reed Hansuld



1 – **Froth with a Fork** – Once the dried soap flakes are mixed with water, it's time for mixing. A fork, chucked in a drill, works wonders. Mix until the soap flakes are completely dissolved.



2 – **Wet, Even Coats** – Froth can be applied all over the piece, then left for a few minutes to soak in. Then use a clean cloth to remove any excess froth and wet areas from the finished piece. Once the piece is dry you can apply another coat.

and coated the parts more than once per application. At this point I let the finish soak in for a few minutes. I then used a new cotton rag and went over the frame, removing any excess suds that built up in corners and any finish that hadn't soaked into the wood. It takes an hour or so for the work to fully dry. At that point I gave the piece a light sanding. After the first two coats, I used 220 grit, then began working to 600 grit with subsequent coats. I have found a minimum of five coats is required, though I have applied as many as 10 coats. The great part is it can all be done in a single day, if drying conditions are good. The following day I buffed the work with a non-abrasive white buffing pad (similar to the Scotch-Brite pads) and the finish was complete.

## Not a Bar-top Finish

Soap finish will not take abuse like varnish or epoxy, but that is not its intention. It is an “in-the-grain” finish, and although

having a noticeable sheen, it is a very minimal finish. It does not make the work sparkle and shine. Instead, it reveals a very muted beauty for those that love the touch and look of natural wood. It is the smoothest finish I have ever touched, and has a very alluring quality to it. It is prone to patina quicker than other finishes; for some, this is desirable. The beautiful part about it is whether it's dirt on an armrest from someone's hands or a spilt glass of red wine, a cloth with warm water and a bit of scrubbing will remove the stains.

Soap finish has become my finish of choice, no question. It is a beautiful minimalist finish that is more enjoyable to work with than any other finishing product I have encountered. It's quicker to apply than most hand-applied finishes, and leaves a very raw, yet finished appearance. There is one major downside to the soap finish, however. It only works well on lighter toned woods – white oak, ash, maple, beech, and species of comparable tones. It is a very muted look that does not yellow the tone of the wood, which is a common downside to using standard wood finishes with these species.

REED HANSULD  
mail@reedhansuld.com



When not spending his summers travelling and teaching furniture-making, Reed can be found on his bike searching for his next destination.