

WOODFIRED LIFE

MY INTERVIEW WITH GREG SEITZ

CO-FOUNDER OF WOODWIRKS CHARCOAL

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On a rainy September morning, I embarked on a 2.75-hour drive to Virginia, eager for my interview with Greg Seitz, co-founder and driving force behind WoodWirks Charcoal.

I had first met Greg about a month earlier as I entered a hardware store. The enticing aroma of food cooking over charcoal drew my attention, and I soon discovered it was a special promotion featuring WoodWirks Charcoal – an exceptional, Culinary Charcoal™ made right here in the DMV (DC, Maryland, Virginia). Although I am not a connoisseur of charcoal, I could immediately taste the difference. I knew I had to learn more about it, so I requested an interview to explore what made this charcoal unique and to write an article that would help others discover this remarkable product.

Upon my arrival, I drove down a dirt road that led me to the heart of the operation, where Greg, COO, Paddy Coker, Culinary Director, and Hilary Kline (Marketing Director) were waiting for me.

From humble beginnings delivering firewood to producing Culinary Charcoal™, WoodWirks has evolved, grown and become an organization that every woodfired Chef or home cook should be aware of, starting with the careful selection of the best logs, followed by cutting them into smaller pieces and placing them in metal drums, which will be delivered to the final phase, where it will become charcoal.

Their story is one of passion, perseverance, and proof that when we are passionate about something, we can achieve more than we ever believed we could.

“When you think about the quality of the product that WoodWirks makes versus other brands you know there's no chemicals involved there's no additives or fluid put on top of the charcoal to make it light faster; this stuff is the cream of the crop and I think ultimately using that better product is better for restaurants as well because they're going to be burning less of it and it works so well that the heat gets there quickly. I always view it as an ingredient, the same as the salt that you put on a steak; it's a flavor enhancer, it has its unique flavor, not just charcoal flavor.” -Paddy Coker



WHERE IT BEGAN, THE ORIGIN STORY OF WOODWIRKS



In February 2020, just as the world was preparing for the sweeping changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, Greg made a significant life transition by retiring from the software industry. Initially, he embraced the newfound free time by indulging in hobbies—playing with his cat, hitting the gym, and working on his golf game. However, as the weeks went by, his routine became mundane, prompting his wife to step in with a humorous but firm suggestion: “You need to find something to do! Just make sure it’s not within 100 yards of this house!” Taking her words to heart, Greg began helping a friend with seasonal tasks at Lake Anna, such as snow removal and yard work.



During his daily commute, he noticed a pile of firewood at a neighbor's house and decided to investigate. After striking a deal with the homeowner, he began loading his truck with firewood each evening and delivering it to clients in Arlington. This side gig quickly took off, with Greg seeing an opportunity to earn some extra cash while keeping himself busy. As the winter season progressed, Greg depleted the seller's entire stock of approximately 75 cords of firewood. He realized that he didn't want to give up this newfound business. During his commute, he stumbled upon another property filled with uncut logs. Upon inquiring about them, he learned the homeowner was looking to get rid of them.

Determined to expand his offerings, Greg struck a deal: he would cut up the logs and pay per cord. This led him to invest in a chainsaw and a firewood splitter, allowing him to pivot entirely to firewood production. With a growing list of about 300 clients in Arlington, Greg quickly found himself juggling deliveries.



As winter came to an end and firewood demand began to wane, a friend encouraged him to think ahead. “What are you going to do in the summer?” he asked. Greg hadn't considered the seasonal shift but was intrigued when his friend suggested making culinary grade from his leftover wood. Determined to explore this new opportunity, Greg conducted research and viewed instructional videos online to understand how to make charcoal. Despite living in a location that limited open flames, he devised a plan. He approached his neighbor and proposed to build a cinder block shed in her backyard for charcoal production, offering to gift the shed to her once he

finished. In exchange, she would monitor the fire overnight, receiving compensation based on the charcoal produced.

Thus, from going to the gym and playing with his cat, Greg transformed his idle retirement life into a thriving business with WoodWirks. Combining passion, creativity, and a keen understanding of his community's needs, he turned a simple idea into a venture that not only brought him fulfillment but also enriched the local economy and reinforced sustainable practices. As WoodWirks continues to grow, Greg's journey exemplifies how seizing unexpected opportunities can lead to rewarding new paths.



THE PATH INTO RESTAURANTS



Greg Seitz – Co founder

The path into the restaurants began when Greg learned about the restaurant Hawksmoor, a charcoal-centric steakhouse in NYC, and its focus on high-quality food. After facing rejection from another butcher shop that mentioned they would only carry his charcoal brand when restaurants successfully used them, Greg was determined to get his charcoal into Hawksmoor. Even though his wife was skeptical, he decided to mail some bags of his charcoal to Paddy Coker, head chef and butcher at Hawksmoor, hoping for positive feedback. He believed that if this restaurant liked his charcoal, then he could approach the butcher in McLean with newfound credibility. After mailing the bags, he waited for a month, uncertain about the outcome but hopeful for a response from Paddy Coker.



Paddy Coker – Chef Ambassador

Weeks passed; life at Hawksmoor was busy and unpredictable, especially since it was their first international opening in the U.S., and they were still navigating the complexities of the American market post-COVID. The restaurant prides itself on using exceptional ingredients and maintaining high standards regarding sustainability and

sourcing. Initially they chose a widely used charcoal, which was considered good, Paddy was wanting something local, sustainable and higher quality.

A month later, the unexpected happened. While stuck in traffic on the Beltway after delivering firewood, Greg received a phone call from a New York number—a call he typically wouldn't answer. To his surprise, it was Paddy Coker, the chef from Hawksmoor, on the other end. Coker informed him that he tried the charcoal and was impressed.



Then he asked if WoodWirks could provide 600 pounds of it—a significant order that highlighted both the chef's interest and the potential for a solid business relationship. Overjoyed but also anxious about such a large request, Greg committed to delivering the charcoal personally, rejecting the option to ship it through a delivery service. Dawn Young, co-founder, CEO bagged all the charcoal. As the week progressed, Greg found himself unable to sleep, fueled by excitement and the pressure of fulfilling this important order.

This journey highlights the trials and tribulations of introducing a new product in a competitive culinary landscape, underlining not only the determination and passion of WoodWirks but also the potential rewards of perseverance and believing in the quality of their work. The prospect of working with Hawksmoor represented a significant milestone for WoodWirks' brand and ambition, setting the stage for further growth and success in the industry.



After working with Hawksmoor NY for a couple of years, Paddy had great news for Greg: Hawksmoor was expanding and opening a location in Chicago, and they wanted to use his product there as well. This opened the door to WoodWirks expansion and journey into a larger operation with new equipment and larger output. This prompted the purchase of a large woodcutter as well as a tractor to move the logs, a larger burning shed, and more barrels to fill with wood to make the charcoal.

THE CHARCOAL FLAVOR



WoodWirks sources different Virginia hardwood species, including White Oak, Chestnut Oak, Red Oak, Cherry, and Apple, to create 12 lbs bags of single-origin Culinary Charcoal. Each wood variety affects the flavor profile of the food cooked over it. In my personal *WoodFired Life*, I usually use Oak; if I am able to find hickory, I will use it as well. In my experience, both burn hot and long. When I asked Paddy Coker about his preference, he stated oak is his preference due to its consistent burn, *“especially at the restaurant when you need that; and when you're talking about repetition, like three, four, five hundred covers of service a day, it's got great flavor.”*

Paddy then offered some great knowledge about wood and flavor combinations. He stated that the apple has some really nice floral notes to it, and it pairs well with proteins such as fish or chicken. It has a more delicate taste to it. The cherry has a completely different flavor altogether; It has more robust notes, it imparts a sweet, earthy nuttiness to food. Great flavor, really unique.

“WoodWirks charcoal is fun to look at as well, the lumps have beautiful shapes and colors when it comes out of the bags, each type of charcoal looks different from one another.”

Hilary Kline

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ORDINARY BRIQUETTES AND WOODWIRKS CHARCOAL

WoodWirks offers pure hard lump Culinary Charcoal™. They know exactly what County the trees have come from and what is in each bag, whether it be oak or cherry, or apple. Because they're using fresh wood, the naturally occurring resin remains throughout the firing process, and that resin from the raw material, when it comes from fresh wood, is the key ingredient to those intangibles and those spices that Paddy explained.

“When you spend money on a quality cut of protein, whether it be chicken, fish, or steak, you don't want to put it on a five-cent fuel. You want to put it on a fuel that's going to enhance your experience. You want your protein to be enhanced, and you want that to be part of your meal experience. This unique flavor won't be achieved with a large bulk manufacturer of briquettes.” Greg Seitz

HOW TO USE WOODWIRKS CHARCOAL

“I recommend you have fun trying all of it”. Paddy Coker

Anyone who loves cooking with fire has probably smoked protein; smoking is great, but there is a time and place for it. However, when you want to grill some steaks, that intense smoky flavor isn't what you want. You really want to feel the beautiful flavors of the beef coming through, particularly if you're grilling something like a filet or a ribeye that costs a lot of money. High heat, high temperature, is better for getting a nice golden sear.

Try mixing it out as well, try new and innovative ways to cook, create your own style. Find what you enjoy the most and enjoy cooking over it.

Many cooks also try new and innovative ideas. Greg knows of a baker who won a competition in Ohio after smoking a cheesecake with their Cherry Charcoal, and a pastry chef at Cordelia Fishhouse in Washington DC who uses the charcoal to smoke some cornbread for an ice cream dish. I've found many people who are keen on cherry charcoal because of how clean it burns and the hint of sweetness that it imparts to what they are cooking. Not many people bake on charcoal.

Life Fire Cookery is a very hard skill to master it may take years. You have to learn how to play with the elements. WoodWirks is helping chefs at Michelin-starred and James Beard-awarded restaurants elevate

their cooking and their creativity. WoodWirks' goal is to educate and show that their Culinary Charcoal™ is several steps above the mass-produced charcoal and ultimately help people enjoy their grilling experience.

“When you lay some pork chops or some shrimp, or wilt some lettuce on your grill with a good cocktail at the end of the evening, I want WoodWirks to be a part of that experience. We believe we make a quality product that does just that.” – Greg Seitz

Next for WoodWirks is the expansion of their production capacity while continuing to upgrade and elevate the quality of what they are doing. WoodWirks will not jeopardize the quality in order to make more. That's why Paddy is part-owner, because his culinary expertise in charcoal makes him a really good quality control officer as we grow or add more varieties.



WoodWirks also offers smoking products for mixologists and for electric smokers that would be used in a restaurant. They are really fine, top-grade shavings, created for mixologists and for electric smokers. When smoking spirits and other cocktails, mixologists should always look for natural products; these will enhance the flavors, not hide them.



WoodWirks has a small team of dedicated individuals who believe in the vision of the company and are vested in their success.

From sustainably sourcing the best quality logs, to delivering the final product, it's obvious to me that WoodWirks is not just making a product, they are creating an experience for everyone who comes in contact with them, whether it's at a hardware store during a promotional event or a world-renowned restaurant, a home cook or a live-fire event, WoodWirks is here for their customers and for the consumers final experience.

WHERE TO FIND WOODWIRKS CULINARY CHARCOAL™



You can currently purchase WoodWirks Culinary Charcoal™ at various butcher shops and at ACE Hardware stores within the DMV. As the company continues to grow, WoodWirks will become available at all ACE Hardware stores nationwide.

For a detailed list of current retailers carrying WoodWirks Culinary Charcoal™, please visit their website at <https://www.woodwirks.com>