

# SO YOU WANT TO CARVE A KUKSA?

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## Before starting, consider:

- How much you want your kuksa to be able to hold (300+ ml is average for a cup of tea or coffee)
- Handle Shape
- Comfort of using the piece (think of the hand-to-mouth motion – you don't want to have to reposition your hold on the kuksa every time you take a drink).



## Tools needed:

- Hatchet! (A straight, flat chisel or a good whittling knife can accomplish the same).
- Whittling knife
- A spoon knife OR a bent gouge chisel
- A straight gouge chisel
- A Mallet
- (At the end of the day, you only really need a straight knife and a crooked gouge chisel – everything else just speeds up the process).

## Remember:

- The size and shape of the tools will, in large part, dictate the shape of the kuksa!
- The harder the wood, the harder the work (AND the more wear placed on your tools as well).

## But before we jump into the how-to ...what *exactly* is a Kuksa anyways?

Info from Natalia Sallansalo & Timothy 'Bjorn' Jones

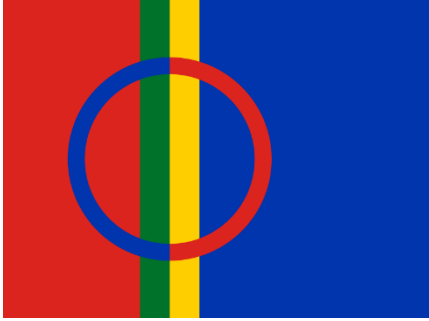
An authentic, traditional kuksa is a wooden cup, made from a birch burl (more on that later). These Kuksa, when made from a Birch burl, require true craftsmanship and follow the tradition of the indigenous Sámi people of Lapland!

The name 'Kuksa' comes from Finnish and other names are "Guksi" (Sámi) or "Kåsa" (Swedish). This type of "cup / mug" carved from wood shows up across essentially all global cultures under different names. Nowadays, "Kuksa" as a term has largely come to encompass any carved, wooden cup that has a handle of some sort. It has come to have an almost sacred status among traditional hikers, bushcrafters, foragers and so on, across many borders!

## Wait, who are the Sámi?

The Sámi are an indigenous people of northern Europe inhabiting Sápmi, which encompasses parts of what is now Northern Sweden, Norway, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula of Russia. The traditional Sámi lifestyle, dominated by hunting, fishing and trading, was preserved until the Late Middle Ages, when the modern structures of the Nordic countries were established.





The Sámi traditional livelihoods and clothing are based on the utilization of natural resources. Extreme harmony with nature was sought. Something common across most, if not all, indigenous cultures (and I would say, something we should all strive for regardless of heritage, but I digress...).

## Okay, the Sámi. Gotcha. But Where Do Kuksas Come In?

Originally, Kuksas were widely used in Arctic areas as a personal drinking cup, so they had to be durable. The Kuksa comes from the “*Duodji*”: the name for the handicrafts of the Sámi people. Duodji is functional and utilitarian by nature, they sometimes display more artistic elements but are everyday objects (knives, bowls etc.). It can help to think of translating “Duodji” as meaning “functional art”.

The name “Guksi” or “Kuksa” literally means ladle, a cup or a scoop, as that is what it was used for. Kuksa have always been popular in Scandinavia and Nordic countries amongst foragers, hikers, nature lovers and it is gaining more popularity again as it is light (for backpacking), environmentally sustainable, a good size, comfy in the hand and of course its looks don’t hurt!

Traditional Kuksas were made from a Birch burl and were used to hold cold or warm drinks and for collecting berries. From my research, coffee seems to be a common drink in the traditional Kuksa. A Birch burl can withstand large temperature differences, and because of this it’s no problem to pour boiling water while the air temperature is a freezing  $-15^{\circ}\text{C}$  or more.

A burl also will not crack when dropped on the ground, which is a huge plus.

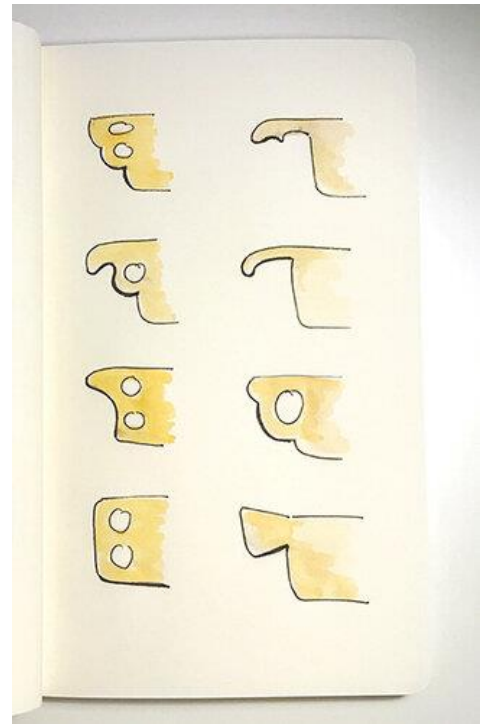
According to tradition, you have to carve your own Kuksa or receive it as a gift from someone who carved it. It should not be purchased.

Because of this, parents will often pass it on to their children.

If you want to make a Kuksa that is more authentic, study historical items and be careful to avoid items made for the tourist industry. For instance, there are no historical examples of Kuksas made with finger holes. Not one.

Finger holes were added in the late 1980's to appeal to American tourists. They are not historically authentic (although, I won't lie, they sure are handy ... pun intended).

Also, you will notice that all modern "tourist Kuksas" for purchase are made with perfectly round bowls that have the widest opening at the top. The reason for this is that the machine used to hollow the cups can do nothing else but cut a perfect half circle.



Historical Kuksas have an inward lip at the top of the opening to keep liquid from spilling, with the widest part of the cup cavity actually being about an inch below the rim. You can accomplish this with hand carving, but these machines cannot.



This photo from a century-old book shows woodenware design from a region of northern Finland in the 1800's.

## Woah Now ...What is a Burl?

A burl is a tree growth in which the grain has grown in a deformed manner. It is commonly found in the form of a rounded outgrowth on a tree trunk or branch that is filled with small knots from dormant buds. Burl formation is typically a result of some form of stress such as an injury or a viral or fungal infection.

Burls give a very peculiar and highly figured wood sought after in a lot of woodworking. The twists, undulations and contortions of the burl's growth gives each piece a unique grain pattern and colour - like a snowflake falling in winter, no two will ever be exactly the same.



Birch burl Kuksas are more durable and will last longer than plain (aka non-burl) Birch and is historically / traditionally the correct wood to be used for a Kuksa.

## Kuksa Care

It is easy to look after your kuksa as you only rinse it with warm water and leave it to dry. The more you use it, the more the flavours will develop over time. Do not use detergents, since it may damage the kuksa and, at the very least, will absorb the perfumes in the detergent.

It is recommended to use it only for coffee or tea, but not necessarily for both since the absorbed flavours can contrast in an unpleasant way. Remember that it is an object which bears traces of its use and so the taste will be unique to your Kuksa. Over time it might capture the smells of perhaps campfires and all the places you have been venturing and that will instantly take you back to those precious memories.

There are different curing techniques. Some boil the cup in salt-water for an hour or more, rinse it and let it dry (we'll talk about the effectiveness of this later...). Others put it in an open bag for up to two weeks. Both procedures are intended to prevent the moisture to evaporate too fast; this could evoke cracks in the material. After dried, the wood can be oiled. Be cautious on which finish you choose, however! (And remember, there is always a chance of the wood unexpectedly cracking the first few times it is exposed to hot water).

As with so many other items of value, there is always someone who will try to make a dollar by producing cheap imitations of the real thing. Not long ago hundreds of protesters in Finland took to the streets to expose companies who had moved kuksa production to China. In contrast, long-standing Scandinavian tradition has it that the only "real" kuksa is one that you either make for yourself, or one you receive as a gift. In keeping with that wonderful, high standard, our purpose here is to make a Kuksa for ourselves, so let's get started!

## Sections to follow:

- Wood Selection
- Splitting the Log
- Carving the Kuksa
- Drying

## Wood Selection:

- While a traditional Kuksa is made from a Birch burl, normal Birch wood is also fantastic! It is nice to work with, has good grain but the main reason it's an optimal choice is that it is less likely to crack when drying or when introducing hot liquids to the kuksa.
- Willow is soft to carve as well, but is not as resistant to cracking as Birch is.
- Cherry, for example, is beautiful wood but is not a good choice for a kuksa as it cracks easily.
- Some other notes:
  - The wood you choose should be carvable and should have a close grain pattern if possible.
  - Avoid woods that have an open grain because they are impossible to clean. Oak for instance is quite hard and durable, but has an extremely open grain that can trap foods and liquid.
  - With any carving project, your wood should be cut so that the center of the tree is completely removed.

# STARTING THE KUKSA

## 1. Splitting the log

- a. You want to split before the pith (centre) of the log. The pith is essentially unusable in this project, but also causes problems with the wood cracking as it dries.

- b. The easiest way to split a log by hand is to use your mallet and a hatchet (or straight chisel) and “score” a straight line across the log where you plan to split it. This small line will help guide where the split will develop.



- c. Split the log.
- d. Once split, you will have essentially half a log, shown here. This will leave you with two options of which side to design and carve into.
- e. NOTE: if your log is large enough to carve a Kuksa from splitting the log into quarters instead of halves, this is preferred and will have less chance of cracking as it dries.



## 2. Choosing a side.

a. **OPTION 1:** Curved, outside, bark side of the log facing down and the flat, inside part facing up, shown here.

i. This is the most natural assumption for carving a kuksa from. It already lends itself to the shape with the curved base.



ii. This approach will give you a deeper kuksa and more wood to work with, but will not have as nice of a grain pattern.

b. **OPTION 2:** The curved, outside bark side of the log facing up and the flat, inside part facing down (the reverse of the picture shown).

i. This approach will give you less wood to work with, but

ii. It will also give you a beautiful grain pattern, resulting in symmetrical rings that circle the bowl of your kuksa.

## 3. Clean up the back of your piece a bit.

The inside, where it was just split.

Create a flat profile for yourself.

#### **4. Remove the sapwood & the bark from your piece.**

A hatchet can make quick work here.

#### **5. Draw your kuksa design onto the wood!**

Bear in mind what you want to achieve.

a. TIP: Trace around a big cup to if you want to establish a nice, symmetrical circle.

b. TIP: Oversize your design a bit to be safe.

c. TIP: Bear in mind that you want it to sit flat on a surface. An easy way to achieve this

(that also lends itself to the shape of the log and your tools) is to design your kuksa to be wider and more shallow, instead of deeper and narrow.



#### **6. Draw a center-line onto all sides of your piece.**

This will help keep things symmetrical as your carve, and can help ensure you have a straight handle if desired.

## 7. Remove Bulk / Excess Wood.

- a. Now that you have your design onto the wood, you know which parts you're not going to be using. Remove the bulk of this before you start! You can use hatchets, knives, chisels ... just be mindful that you don't cut into or split into your drawn design!



- b. TIP: Don't forget to clear up a bit behind your handle as well.
- c. TIP: As long as you are cautious, you can start to "bowl" or round the underside of your kuksa a bit. Remember, you still want symmetry at this point!
- d. REMEMBER: Keep the center of the bottom of your bowl FLAT.
- e. REMEMBER: Consider keeping the two ends flat (ie the front of your bowl and in back of the handle) so that you can potentially clamp your piece if need be.



## 8. Start to hollow out the inside of the bowl!

- a. TIPS & TRICKS: Mark a pencil or pen with the overall depth of your piece. This way you can easily place it inside the bowl of your kuksa and know how much wood you have left!



- b. Start by using a back and forth approach with a straight gouge. While starting the bowl, you have to be extra careful that the wood doesn't split. Essentially you are creating a "relief" in the middle before carving out the rest. Be mindful of the grain!
- c. Continue with this "back and forth" until the initial 1 cm or so of your bowl is removed.
- d. After this, you can use your straight gouge to 'straighten' out the walls of the bowl a bit.
- e. Once you have created some depth, switch to your crooked gouge chisel and leave the mallet! Instead, push with the chisel to delicately remove wood.

**9. Once middle of the bowl is all hollowed out, clean up the outside of the bowl's surface with a knife or a rasp/file.**

- a. DON'T take too much. Hold yourself back a bit! Remember that sanding will remove depth too.
- b. TIP: Start by rounding out the flat ends first (at the end and the front) if you left this flat for clamping.



- c. TIP: You can use your knife to finely curve the inside of the rim as well.
- d. REMEMBER: Knife safety! This work is slippery. A safe way to approach this is to lock your elbow and wrist when you pull, so that there is a firm 'stopping point' if you do slip, that won't hurt you.
- e. REMEMBER: Do NOT carve towards your thighs. This can kill you. If you have to carve in this motion, hold your work to the side of your hip instead.
- f. TIP: If you do have a spoon knife, they work better as finishing tools, not removal tools.
- g. TIP: Remember symmetry!!!

## 10. Back of the bowl

- a. TIP: Utilize a stop cut on the bottom underside of the handle, to round out the back of the bowl. This will help connect the handle transition as well.



## 11. DRYING & FINISH

- a. Only 20 mins or so on a hot day can start cracks.
- b. Dry slowly but not so slowly that there's mold growth.
- c. In a draft-free room, store your piece inside a plastic bag. Turn this bag inside out every 2<sup>nd</sup> day for the first 3-5 days.  
After this, do the same but with the bag open.
- d. TIP: If only using cold drinks, you can fill any cracks that may develop with beeswax. This will melt if using hot liquids, however.
- e. TIP: Flaxseed or food-grade linseed oil (not "Boiled" Linseed Oil, but "Raw" Linseed Oil) will cure into a bit of a soft solid. 100% Pure Tung Oil is similar, but will harden even more.
- f. TIP: You can choose to finish the outside only or both inside and outside. However, you cannot finish JUST the inside of the Kuksa.
- g. TIP: Do thin layers and let it dry a bit. Rub in the linseed with your hands.
- h. TIP: The outside of the kuksa is more important to finish because it will better resist mold.
- i. TIP: If you are drinking coffee, this will naturally build up an inside protection.