

CRAFTING AN HEIRLOOM

The ultimate finishing touch for your aircraft, yacht or home is a unique bespoke dinner service, created especially for you. *Altitudes* spoke to Scott Ritter, President and CEO at Dahlgren Duck and Associates, an American company, which has been creating museum quality china, cutlery and crystal for more than 30 years, about how its done.

By Jill Stockbridge



Want unique, bespoke flatware for your jet, yacht or palace? Wish to display your family coat of arms, or immortalise your favourite horse? Join heads of state and international business leaders in consulting Dahlgren Duck, providers of the precious, inimitable and delightful for more than 30 years. Scott Ritter, former world-class whitewater kayaker, joined the company 12 years ago and has recently bought out the eponymous partners and high school friends, Jim Dahlgren and Allan Duck, although he is happy to keep their expertise and knowledge close by.

How did the company start?

The initial focus was bespoke customer items for private aviation. Jim Dahlgren was travelling in Europe, visiting factories and saw some bespoke pieces being created. He realised that there was a market for this in the private aviation world. We started in wide-body completions, and then moved into business jets. Our clients then said: 'We have a palace, or we have a yacht, we would like you to create something for'.

Our clients are past the stage of wanting what everyone else has. People who are spending US\$100 million plus on aircraft want a more personal experience. They have bought the brands, now they want something

that is unique to them. This is their entertainment space, they bring VIPs and other heads of state here into their sanctuary and these items become conversation pieces.

Do the owners tend to get involved with the designs?

Cutlery and china are intensely personal items, that are touched and used every day, or every time the owner is on the aircraft. For this reason the owners are usually very involved in the process of creating the items, especially towards the end of the selection process when they give final approval.

I have been privileged to meet several heads of state as they became very engaged in the process. Naturally, they want to hold and feel the items, many of which will end up in their national museum or handed down through the families. It is very personal to them.

How does the process work?

First we get to know the client's preferences. We get a feel for the environment they are trying to create. We look at the colours, textures and any design elements that are important to that client. From that point we'll understand what they are looking for and we start to put together sketches. Our designer will combine different elements; a bespoke pattern plate with pierced holes, different colours, different shapes, and perhaps certain personal elements such as a turbine of an aircraft or a favourite animal.

We also look at the materials that are available. Depending on the client's preferences this could be bone china or French Limoges porcelain. For cutlery, sterling silver or gold, to leaded crystal or unleaded crystal in glasses.

We will start with a sketch, an idea, a shape. Semi-custom would be taking an existing shape, brand or pattern and decorating it differently. With bespoke we are creating unique shapes or pieces. We worked on a project for a father, who had three sons, and he wanted something reflecting the family, and its heritage. We created a distinctive triangle-shape, reflecting the trio of children, that was replicated in the china plates and the stems of the crystal. Once we make a design, we will never do it again. Each is a one-off concept.

Once the concept is approved, we create 2D renderings, 3D renderings and finally fired samples that the client will review. Only then do we go into full production.

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Design inspiration
can come from
anywhere, in this
case the pattern of a
specific nut casing.



Do you produce in different parts of the world?

We work with a handful of craftsmen and artists around the world. Each is unique in what they do and form part of our exclusive, unique network. Depending on the client's requirements we know who are the people to go to for that manufacturing process.

No other company has the experience of working with these materials and these artisans. The factories are very exclusive and our relationships with them have developed over the last 30 years. In addition, we have direct relationships with all of the leading luxury brands which have the necessary craftsmen and the heritage. They have been doing this for hundreds of years, originally creating items for the aristocracy. The practice has been handed down through the generations, who maintain these tradi-

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Each design is
unique and will only
be produced for that
individual customer.

tions. They are some of the most passionate people you can meet, they love what they do and are happy to make pieces that are unique. They consider them works of art.

Because it is all hand made, each project takes time. We worked on a very large palace in Abu Dhabi that took us nearly two years to finish. There are just not enough skilled hands to produce such quantities quickly, so we had to phase it over a couple of years. Dealing with handmade bespoke items, we can easily make one, if you break one, or would like another sample. The bigger challenge is larger orders. It is a work of art, so the clients understand, usually.

Do you have any memorable challenges?

We have just finished a project where our client requested a neo-classical Moroccan theme. Our designer's eyes lit up, as he knew the perfect place for inspiration. He came up with something that was based on a design inside a mosque in Casablanca. When we presented it, they went crazy. It was exactly what they wanted. It took us about six weeks to create and the client was delighted. We love it when they challenge us with new ideas. We really love what we do.

We work with a range of precious and semi-precious materials. We created a beautiful range of cutlery and china both set with lapis lazuli. It was challenging as there was a shortage of lapis at the time, but we knew where we could go to source it.

The client loves horses, so we created a stirrup strap and the stirrup in the cutlery. It is incredibly difficult to do and there is only one place in the world that knows how to create the 3D sterling silver effect, and then the jeweller inlaid the lapis. It was a unique process and one in which we learned new things.

We produced the prototypes with flat inlay, but we ended up doing cabouchons as it looked better. When you are creating something that has never been done before you don't know how it is going to turn out until you produce a sample. And then you end up refining that throughout the process.

Is every line that you create unique?

Absolutely. It is amazing how often we get a call from a private office, from someone who has been entertained by one of our

clients. They say, we love that service, we would like to have some. But we have to explain that we are happy to create something for them, but we cannot replicate another client's product.

We own all the moulds. This means we have the ability to go back and recreate items if we need to. However, many of our clients, when it is time to replace it, just want to come in and create a whole new service.

Although these are works of art, they are also utensils, how does that affect the process?

Yes, they are beautiful, but they have to be practical as well. A fork has to be able to be washed over and over, and has to have the right weight and balance in your hand.

We do have to educate the aircraft staff in how to care for the cutlery. These are not standard forks as you have all the very small grooves and it is a different process for cleaning care.

Where is your biggest market?

For bespoke items of this quality, it is predominantly the Middle East and Eastern Europe. In our Dallas, Texas headquarters we have our museum room, and there you can see many unique heads of states' services. We also have clients in Asia and the US.

You also make rare objects d'art.

Yes, often for the same clients. One client had a large wide body aircraft and he wanted the focal piece when he went into his bedroom to be his favourite horse. He gave us a picture of the horse and we made a dramatic sterling handmade sculpture of this horse rearing up on its back legs.

What sort of price range are clients looking at?

The amount that is spent on these items will never be published. It depends on the size of the service, the materials – semi-precious or precious stones. To our clients, price is important, but it is not what drives them. They want the quality.

People come into the office and say that they want the very top end. Well that depends what you want. I can show you a US\$3,000 fork, but not everyone wants that.

Our focus is providing world-class service and the value we bring as experienced consultants, with over 36 years experience.



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The items have to be practical as well as beautiful, able to withstand regular use and washing.

RIISING TO THE CHALLENGES

“One client loved everything we had done, but they especially wanted the champagne bubbles to light up in their flutes. We created a unique sterling silver base that could hold a specially designed glow stick. The crystal flute was then screwed into the base so the glow could illuminate the bubbles. On the inaugural flight of the plane, they dimmed the lights, the champagne lit up and it was the toast of the aircraft. Really, we can imagine anything for our clients.” - Scott Ritter