

# NEW FACES

## MATT TOMMEY

written by Taylor Bello

For Matt Tommey every basket begins with a walk in the woods. Even as a young child growing up in rural Columbus, Georgia, Matt was captivated by the art of basket making and handcrafts. "I was always into the outdoors and making things out of natural materials," says Tommey. Throughout his high school years he stayed true to his craft and continued to experience nature first hand. He was an active member of the Order of the Arrow, an honor society under the Boy Scouts of America.

Matt graduated from Hardaway High School in the spring of 1991 and enrolled at Young Harris College in beautiful north Georgia that fall. After graduating from YHC in 1993 with his Associate's Degree, Matt transferred to the University of Georgia in Athens where he obtained his Bachelors Degree in Education. Amid the clear skies and cool breezes of autumn, Matt began work at the University Bookstore on campus. There, he stumbled upon a doomed copy of "Willow Basketry" by Bernard and Regula Verdet-Fierz, ready for the trash bin. "It was going to be returned and have the cover ripped off but I rescued it" Matt recalled. Upon further reading, he decided to give some of the techniques mentioned in the book a try using a material plentiful to Georgia and his own backyard - kudzu. Soon he was out and about in the woods gathering kudzu and other knarled vines, shaping them into vessels of art. With the aid of the Verdet-Fierzs' literature and his God-given ability to create, Matt's baskets soon caught the attention of peers, colleagues, and others who looked to purchase his work. "My buddies started buying them around Christmas time. I was a junior in college and had only been making baskets like that for less than a year." And thus, the 20-year-old college student stuck his foot in the door of a lifelong career.

Basketry remained a hobby for about 15 years but at this point, Matt doesn't owe his income to basketry alone. He continues to work as a marketing consultant, graphic designer, and musician. In December of 2009 Matt, his wife Tanya, and son Cameron moved to Asheville, North Carolina so that he could pursue his craft full time.

*Every basket  
begins with a walk  
in the woods.*



### **Rib Basket**

Dimensions: 12" x 9" x 8"

Kudzu, Honeysuckle, Wisteria bark, Eleagnus

Photography by: Paul Jeremias  
Asheville, NC



**Hen Basket**

Dimensions: 17" x 17" x 10"  
Kudzu, Honeysuckle, Eleagnus  
Photography by: Paul Jeremias  
Asheville, NC

them to prevent shrinkage. After that, he soaks the vines so that they're ready for weaving, divine inspiration then "takes the wheel" and what once

was only a disheveled pile of vines soon arises as a detailed creation that is both traditional and contemporary.

One of the things that make Matt Tommey's baskets unique is the personal touch he incorporates into each and every one of his products. "All of my pieces feature a handmade copper leaf, which represents the medium used in the basket, like kudzu or grapevine – it's my trademark."

Past accolades are only the beginning for Matt Tommey, and he is confident in the future he has with his art. He aspires to raise awareness of the craft, experiment with new forms and mentor emerging artists in order to leave a legacy for future generations. "I want to be known as an innovator who does things that no one else does with natural materials." One day he hopes to see his baskets displayed in museums and private collections all over the world, but one thing is for certain, every basket begins with a walk in the woods. 🌲

MATT TOMMEY

Although he attended a few lectures early in his career, Matt's approach to basket making is truly his own. His baskets have been described as "a whimsical collaboration of traditional Appalachian forms and wild, rustic, natural materials". Matt's interpretation of rib baskets and other traditional shapes offer a heartfelt nod to his roots in Appalachian basketry while offering a contemporary expression that is all his own. "Western North Carolina is chocked full of beautiful, easy to find natural materials. I enjoy the harvesting process as much as the weaving" says Tommey. Matt harvests all of his own materials, including vines like kudzu, wisteria, honeysuckle, and grapevine, as well as local bark from poplar and hickory trees, to name a few. He then cleans and separates his haul, curing



**Potato Basket**

Dimensions: 18" x 12" x 3"  
Honeysuckle, Eleagnus & Kudzu  
Photography by: Paul Jeremias  
Asheville, NC