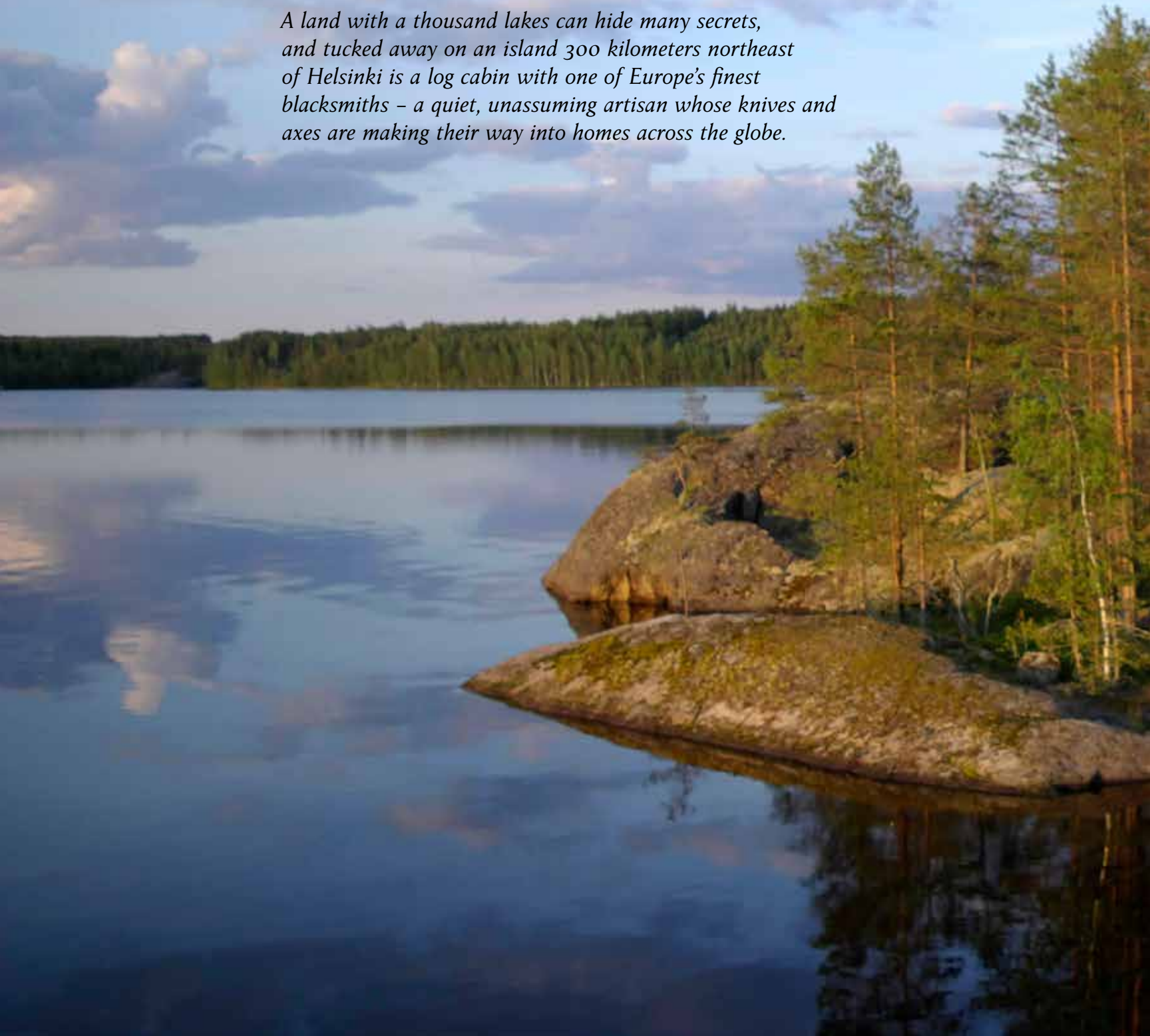


# FORGING A TRADITION: MARTTI MALINEN

WRITTEN BY AMANDA GEARD | PHOTOS COURTESY OF GOOSEMEADOW FORGE

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*A land with a thousand lakes can hide many secrets, and tucked away on an island 300 kilometers northeast of Helsinki is a log cabin with one of Europe's finest blacksmiths – a quiet, unassuming artisan whose knives and axes are making their way into homes across the globe.*





Lake Saimaa is a wilderness of acute seasons; crisp and colorful autumns give way to peaceful, frozen winters, and 3,500 lake islands open up for exploration on forest skis. The slow melt of spring brings with it the anticipation of summer, of life and warmth and an influx of tourists keen to experience a place renowned for its unadorned natural beauty. And each year, between June and August, 2,000 people make their way to the island village of Niinisaari to experience the exquisite craftsmanship of Martti Malinen, a man who works raw metal into handsome, practical objects using techniques and skills which have remained unchanged for centuries.

Malinen's beautifully-named Goosemeadow Forge harkens back to a time when blacksmiths were a key focal point within towns across Europe, and although he is gaining worldwide regard for the quality of his knives

and axes, Malinen touts himself simply as the village smith. "I don't want to fill the world with my knives ... but if the neighbor comes to me and asks me to forge a candle holder I will make it gladly," he says. "My duty is to be the smith in the local community."

Like so many Scandinavians and Finns of his generation, Malinen grew up exploring the forests of the north, hunting and fishing and living from the land throughout the seasons, developing a connection with his surroundings, which strengthened with each passing year. Even as a teenager he crafted his own skis, backpacks and fishing equipment; he practiced with everything he made and it wasn't long before he was turning his hand to that ubiquitous piece of kit for the woodsman: the knife.





#### LEARNING BY WATCHING, DOING

Malinen cites his father, a carpenter, as a major influence on him. “The first knife I held was my father’s Swedish Mora knife. I was 3 years old and it is one of my earliest memories. I was never told not to touch his tools, and you can imagine how interesting the workshop and whittling with Dad was for me,” he remembers. Initially, Malinen made knives using ready-made blades, but to a teenager used to inventing and creating, this wasn’t enough and he started experimenting with forging, using the steel melted from old files. Many years later, when he graduated from Evo Forestry College in 1998, Malinen set up his own blacksmith workshop, learning as he went.

“I have studied hammering by myself mainly ... but in

the beginning I contacted old masters and visited their workshops,” Malinen wrote on Nordiska Knivar, a website devoted to traditional Nordic knives. He was not just influenced by Finnish masters, such as Uuno Vedenpää, but he also found inspiration across Scandinavia, seeking out Hovard Bergland, a Norwegian blacksmith based in Bergen who specializes in wood working tools, another of Malinen’s skills.

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*“I am still thinking, studying ... it’s a lifetime journey but I have found my lifestyle, or rather my knife style, and I’ll keep it.”*

When I ask how his techniques have developed over time, Malinen considers: “The first knives I made looked similar to the ones I make today,” and then he smiles. “But perhaps now the shape is a little more cultured.” His knives have changed where necessary – he now works with carbon steel – but he is a champion of traditional materials and his creations carry an authenticity which makes them as practical as they are beautiful. He forges a typical Finnish knife shape with a blade that is shorter than the width of the user’s hand. The handle is also short, made from bone or local wood, such as the stunningly swirled Karelian birch. The sheath is thick leather wrapped around a wooden lath for strength and shape and is often made from reindeer hide.

#### OF THE OLD WAYS

Malinen creates his pieces with a traditional charcoal forge, a conscious decision by a man who values the old ways. “A charcoal forge heats fast and tolerates the volume changes of the steel – for my work it is the best. I use something like 1,000 kilograms of charcoal in a year, which I order from the local maker, so it is a very ecological birch charcoal.”

With this traditional forge he makes anything from 50 to 100 knives a year, selling most of them directly from his gallery in Niinisaari. His most popular knife is the Koivumäki, a simple, functional knife for woodcarving and fish cleaning. And this practicality is something that Malinen is determined should be integral to everything he makes. It is his knowledge of the forest that gives him an intimate understanding of what it is that hikers, hunters and woodsmen look for in their tools. He says, “I learned that a good light axe which splits well and doesn’t slip out of your hand in winter when you have thick mittens on, is essential ... also a knife should be able to do all kinds of jobs when on long field trips; it is natural for me to think about the essential characteristics of good wilderness tools and transplant them to my workshop.”

A Koivumäki may be a beautiful implement, but Malinen does not see it this way; his tools are instruments to be wielded, not admired. He does not make products which are “too fancy and too expensive to use,” but rather, he keeps his tools simple, elegant and above all, functional. This attitude has won him a devoted following

from a new generation of blacksmiths, all inspired by his ability to produce quality pieces from traditional methods and materials. He has taught many eager students, including Pasi Hurttila and Ilkka Seikku, both now renowned blacksmiths in their own right. Throughout the year, Malinen runs four-day blacksmithing workshops at Goosemeadow, during which time the students normally make two Finnish knives. He also creates custom courses for people with specific forging interests. “Last August I had two clients from Canada. They ordered a log house builder’s tool course. It was a long way to fly from Canada to Finland for four days but they were very happy!”

The success of his tuition suggests, surely, that Malinen is now entering the realm of Master. But when I ask him if he has perfected his trade he insists that he still has much to learn. “The craftsman never reaches the perfect level in his skills, there is always something to develop and study.”

Although Malinen is primarily teaching knife making, it is possibly his axes which are receiving the most vocal acclaim. To forge an axe is a complicated skill and, unlike knife making, a dying art. “We have a rich culture in axes but no makers anymore,” he says. “I have found axe making challenging but at the same time extremely interesting because I have had to develop the techniques myself.”

He sells only about 30 axes each year, many of them specially commissioned for log house builders and instrument makers; all of them destined for intensive, real-world use. His tools have found their way to the USA, across Europe and through to the antipodes and Asia. “Last year I sent a few axes to Malaysia. It was a long trip for my tools but now they hew tropical hardwoods,” he says, and I can see that he takes pleasure in knowing his tools are well used and that a blacksmith’s work is appreciated.

In 2015, the forge at Goosemeadow will celebrate its tenth anniversary and Martti Malinen will have been making knives for 27 years in a labor of love which has shaped a quietly celebrated master artisan. When asked where he will be in another 27 years, Malinen does not hesitate:

*“I am still thinking, studying ... it’s a lifetime journey but I have found my lifestyle, or rather my knife style, and I’ll keep it.”*

