Shellac Solvent: Grain Alcohol vs. Denatured Alcohol

Shellac is a wonderful finish with a fantastic range of applications and possibilities. It can range from an easy utility finish all the way up to the finest of fine polished finishes. Here is a way to make your shellac finishes better and easier to use. This gets a little scientific, but stick with me, it's worth it in the end.

It is very important to think about the solvent used to dissolve the shellac. Most people simply use commercially available "denatured" alcohol. Denatured alcohol is a general alcohol-based solvent used for a variety of applications across many industries. Mixed with shellac, it will produce a serviceable finish. However, it has some problems when it comes to shellac.

The first is that there is no industry regulation regarding what precisely constitutes denatured alcohol. This means that some brands are cut with water to increase their volume, often by as much as 20%.

The second is that there is no way of knowing what kind of alcohol was used to produce the product. Some brands contain methanol, a cheaper, more volatile and dangerous form of industrial alcohol that can be used to bulk up the volume of solvent. This inconsistency makes it difficult to predict the behavior of the shellac both as it dissolves and as it dries as a finish.

Quite apart from the mysterious composition of commercially available denatured alcohol, there is another major concern. To prevent people from recreationally drinking this industrial solvent, denatured alcohol contains substances such as denatonium, benzene, and pyridine. These compounds are called *denaturants,* hence the term "*denatured*" alcohol. These additives are meant solely to help prevent people from drinking industrial alcohol by giving it a bad taste and a powerful smell. ***They do nothing for your shellac!*** In fact quite the opposite, as these additives interfere with the dissolution process and remain in your finish after the alcohols have evaporated out. This can lead to difficulties in drying, polishing, and applying a fine shellac finish, as well as interfering with the clearness of the final finish.