

When You're Hot, You're

**LOCAL
GLASS
BLOWERS
BRING
NEW
ARTISTRY
TO AN
ANCIENT
ART**



BY JENNIFER HAZARD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HUBERT SCHRIEBL

TOOLS

My introduction to glassblowing was at Waterford Crystal in Ireland. I went to the factory based on a friend's recommendation, although at the time I was less than enthusiastic. I'm not into expensive crystal or tourist hot spots, but it was (surprise!) a rainy day in Ireland and an indoor activity seemed just the thing.

At the factory, our group was led

Nick Kekic creates glass while wife Tamasin and daughter Gwendylan look on

to an enormous furnace where workers were busy gathering, shaping, and molding molten glass on five-foot long steel poles. They worked quickly, blowing into the mouthpieces while spinning the poles wildly between their palms. The hot glass was shaped using an array of tools that looked like Medieval weapons, lopped off the poles, and delivered to cooling ovens on a conveyor belt. I could have stayed there all day.

For \$50 per hour, Andrew Weill of Manchester Hot Glass teaches curious people like me how to work similar Waterford magic. Newcomers won't create elaborate crystal goblets here, instead they start by making a simple marble and graduate to a paperweight by the end of the session. Weill first familiarizes the class with the blowpipe and then shows them how to gather glass from the furnace. Known in Weill's studio as 'the dragon,' the furnace burns at 2100°F and holds up to 300 pounds of molten glass. Once students master gathering, they learn how to blow small bubbles. "It's a lot of fun to watch," Weill says, "first timers blow the funkiest looking things." He demonstrates this by holding the pole straight up in the air and blowing on it like he's Louis Armstrong.

To manipulate the glass into a desired shape, students must simultaneously blow and spin. "Glass blowing is truly the art of perpetual motion," Weill informs me. The glass is kept in a workable, taffy state by reheating it in a secondary furnace called the glory hole. Color can be added by rolling the glass in small pieces of crushed colored glass known as frit. Weill says, "It's just like applying jimmies to an ice cream cone."

The tools and methods used to make glass have been in existence for centuries, although the American studio glass movement is quite young. Prior to the 1930's, glass was predominantly made in factories like Waterford. The studio glass movement emerged when industrial glass artists began to experiment with temperature, shape, and color. The movement flourished in the 1960's, when a glass



Andrew Weill of Manchester Hot Glass

artist named Harvey Littleton led workshops in Toledo, Ohio where aspiring artists could learn how to build their own tools and materials, blow glass, and manage a studio.

Nick Kekic of Tsuga Studios in Chester is a descendant of this movement, although he didn't always know it. Kekic's father pioneered the glass art program at Rochester Institute of Technology in the sixties, but changed careers before his son was born. In 1983, Kekic's father passed away and it seemed his art would die with him. "When my dad was alive, I was too young to ask or even think to ask him about glass making," he says.

Kekic went to Colorado College to pursue a degree in English Literature, but he quickly became restless and took a semester off to reconsider his direction. His mother suggested he enroll in a glass making workshop at the Pen-

land School of Crafts in North Carolina. While there, Kekic was approached by artists his father had influenced and inspired. "I was so thrilled to learn of my father's legacy, I wrote my grandmother to tell her how proud I was to be a second-generation glassblower. She wrote back and told me my grandfather made lenses, light bulbs, and other industrial glass products at General Electric. So it turns out I'm third generation. Once I realized I had this history, it was a hard thing to disregard," he says.

Students of Kekic's father at the Rochester Institute, Hank and Toby Schwartz were a part of the studio glass movement's beginnings. After college, the Schwartz' settled in a tiny, one room cabin in the woods of Jamaica, Vermont. The husband-and-wife team is a pioneer in every sense of the word. In the studio glass tradition, the couple



Lucy Bergamini, Vitriessie Glass

made their cooling oven, work bench, and furnace. They lived in one room for eight years and made glass outdoors for three. "We didn't even know we were suffering because we were having so much fun," Hank says.

Over the years, the duo built on to their home/studio, had two babies and never looked back. Hank says, "I like to wake up and say to myself, what do I want to make today? And then change my mind." Toby specializes in remarkably detailed etched glass pieces while Hank describes his designs as "free, fun, fluid, and funky." Their storeroom is a veritable feast for the eyes, chock full of colorful perfume bottles, vases, ornaments... you name it. "Little babies come in with their parents and their eyes just pop and go in circles," Hank says. "Because we're two fiercely independent, creative people, we have the freedom to do so much."

Lucy Bergamini, owner of Vitriessie Glass in Weston, is yet another area glass-making pioneer. In the early years of the movement, the studio glass industry was predominantly male. Bergamini recalls an interview at a well-known glass-making studio where she was told "we don't envision women working on our floor." Rather

than become discouraged, Lucy decided to go into business on her own. She credits her family for her chutzpah. "I was the youngest—a lone girl among three big brothers, so I had to carve a place for myself early on."

When I spoke with Bergamini, she'd just returned from a wholesale crafts show in Baltimore and was preparing for another in Philadelphia. The shows feature artisans from various mediums and are attended by thousands of buyers from all over the world. Bergamini says, "These shows basically govern whether I have a job or not the next year." She tells me the competition between glass artists has increased significantly. In the twenty plus years that Bergamini has been in the business, the number of glassblowers attending the shows has grown from 16 to over 1400. "But there are positives to the growth, too," Bergamini points out. "There are so many more women now, it's great."

While many glass artists go to market to sell their wares, others appeal to potential customers on their own. To establish his Manchester business, Andrew Weill decided to follow an early mentor's advice. "He told me that if I wanted to make any money, I had to diversify my work.

I've held true to that in my shop." Beyond creating colorful vases, bowls, and ornaments, Weill also welcomes repairs and custom work.

True to their independent spirit, Hank and Toby Schwartz have also maintained their business through word of mouth, hard work, and dedication. Toby recalls a woman who requested etched glasses featuring



Hot Glass Works

To visit these glass blowers, please call ahead for studio hours:

Andrew Weill
Manchester Hot Glass Studio & Gallery
79 Elm Street, Manchester Center
Phone: 362-2227
Website: www.manchesterhotglass.com

Nick Kekic
Tsuga Studios
678 Goldthwaite Road, Chester
Phone: 875-1825
Web site: www.tsugastudios.com

Hank and Toby Schwartz
H.O.T. Glass Works
23 Goldman Lane, Jamaica
Phone: 874-4436
Web site: www.hotglassworks.net

Lucy Bergamini
Vitriesse Glass Studio
67 Chester Mountain Road, Weston
Phone: 824-4000
Web site: Lucy's work can be found at
www.froghollow.org
Click Shop Online

Support your Southern Vermont glass blowers and other local artisans. Learn more on the Vermont Crafts Council site: www.vermontcrafts.com

scenes from her 35-year marriage. "I had to eat, sleep, and breathe this couple's life. She gave me her whole family album to work from. I finished the project in a course of a year and in the end, she joked that I knew more about her family than her shrink."

The Schwartz' are also known for



Toby and Hank Schwartz in their eclectic studio/home

their specialty glass coins and requests pour in from museums, gift shops, colleges, and other businesses. Toby carves the designs by hand on graphite in reverse, Hank creates the colors, and together they stamp the designs on each piece. It's a lot of work, but the couple clearly enjoys every minute of it. "We're a captive audience for each other," Hank says. "We sing. We dance. All of our art is made with love."

Lucy Bergamini found success creating brightly colored glass-beaded bracelets, earrings, and necklaces. "It was really a happy accident—a blip on the radar screen," she says. "I just happened to come across an old book that pictured two glass artists pulling on hollow glass tubing. That's when I got the idea." Bergamini pulls, cuts, and polishes the tubing, also known as cane, to create her glass beads. She uses a similar technique when making her intricate Latticino vases, bowls, and goblets. Blown glass canes are twisted and fused together to create vessels that are virtual celebrations of color and light. When I ask Bergamini what inspires her, she says, "I use old techniques and then add my own personal touch. I think that's what's helped me stay on the cutting edge."

Staying current in a saturated market is a challenge for most glass

blowers. "It's really difficult to come up with fresh ideas," Nick Kekic says, although you wouldn't know it by looking at his work. Kekic's studio features a line of both translucent and opaque bowls, bottles, pitchers, and vases in clean, modern designs that are rich in color. For the average person, handmade glass pieces like Kekic's are expensive to buy—a pitcher retails at \$145—but he may spend up to two hours crafting that 14-inch, functional work of art. Then there are the high priced materials and studio operating expenses to consider. Just imagine how much it would cost to run a furnace at 2100°F during Vermont's cold winters. "Unfortunately, people don't value handmade objects like they used to," Kekic tells me. "They can go to places like Pier 1 and buy a pitcher for \$15.00. It's a tough battle to win."

Making a living as a glass blower is difficult, but the challenge seems to be the driving force for many to continue their art. "I often wish I could be an octopus," Toby Schwartz muses, "so I could get to all of the things I want to do." ♦

Jennifer Hazard is a free lance writer who divides her time between Manchester and Maine