

# PMM

FINE LIVING IN GREENWICH NCETON

**BEHIND  
THE  
SCENES**

of 'a christmas carol'



## Holiday Feast

with personal chef to the stars michael giletto



# Blown Away

## TRACING THE PATH OF SPIRALS AND SWIRLS IN BELLE MEAD HOT GLASS' CREATIONS

by susan van dongen | photos by mark czajkowski

**T**here's a kind of yin and yang to Belle Mead Hot Glass' creations. You are reminded of the spiral twirls on a child's sandcastle, sea foam or delicate bubbles in a bath. But the pieces are solid and heavy, and there is little ephemeral about them. Yet they are constructed of glass, so they're also fragile, and that is the contradiction to the works. One thing is for certain: you can't stop looking at them, and that's thanks to the talents of the company's founder-artisan, Robert Kuster.

In the early 1990s, in his mid-30s, the South Brunswick native began blowing glass as a second career. He founded Belle Mead Hot Glass, and has since become one of the country's most sought after glass artisans, crafting large works that fetch more than \$20,000.

Inspired by organic forms in nature, Mr. Kuster incorporates shapes and textures of flowers, bamboo, icicles, gourds, seaweed and fruit into his fantastical works.

Recently, a visitor walked through the hot, bustling studio just over the border of Hillsborough, where a handful of assistants carefully moved large plates of glass to the back room. In various shades of yellow, from sunflower to gold to maize, the plates are components of the chandeliers Belle Mead Hot Glass was commissioned to create for the new Parx Casino in Bensalem, Pa. Each could be a super-sized platter for a holiday dinner.

Sheila Kuster, Belle Mead Hot Glass' owner/partner/CEO, points to a gorgeous work, a prototype for the casino installation. Although its gossamer globes and swirls seem to

float as though the piece is suspended by spider web silk, Ms. Kuster says the chandelier weighs thousands of pounds. It looks like fairies created it, but it took a feat of engineering to keep it together and aloft.

That is Mr. Kuster's gift: he is an artisan with an engineer's mind. Plus he surrounds himself with "figure-it-out" types of assistants, experts in metal working, gifted animators and graphic artists as well as other talented glass blowers.

"The project for Parx Casino is titled 'Floral Sweep' and the chandeliers will be the crown jewels of the casino," Ms. Kuster says. "The central one will be 14 feet across and 10 feet high. Glass blowers from all over the country were hired to create art for the casino but we got the big job."

Chandeliers have become Belle Mead Hot Glass' signature creations and can be seen at the Ritz-Carlton in Denver, the Marriott in Salt Lake City and the Seneca Corporation's casinos in upstate New York. Mr. Kuster is represented by Ethel A. Furman Associates in Alexandria, >>

*Facing page: Belle Mead Hot Glass artisans have been hard at work on a chandelier for Parx Casino in Bensalem, Pa., which is composed of large multicolored plates.*







Va., Visions Fine Arts Gallery in Sedona, Ariz., and Functional Art Glass in Seattle, among others.

Those who visited the former Quark Park in Princeton might have seen Mr. Kuster's hundreds of bubble-like spheres hanging from fishing line, a collaborative effort with mechanical engineer Naomi Ehrich Leonard. (Quark Park is gone, but the work lives on in the grounds adjacent to Mr. Kuster's studio.)

On a smaller scale, Belle Mead Hot Glass also makes hand-blown *objets*, paperweights, wine bottle stoppers and holiday ornaments, displayed in the studio's retail space. The more miniature works have been sold at Neiman-Marcus in Manhattan and the venerable Gump's department store in San Francisco.

Public installations of Mr. Kuster's work have also appeared at the Golden Globe Awards, the premiere for the movie *Finding Nemo*, and on the vast grounds of Acuity Insurance Company. In 2004, his huge installation "Seven Sisters" was installed at Acuity's corporate headquarters in Sheboygan, Wisc. Comprised of seven chandeliers measuring 15 feet in diameter, the project took Belle Mead Hot Glass to a new level.

"That job kicked everything off," Ms. Kuster says. "That's when we began to work large."

Glass has, indeed, been good to Mr. Kuster. Previously, he had been overseeing Kuster Manufacturing, founded as a woodworking business, and situated for a while in the same facilities in Hillsborough.

"Originally he was making furniture, but then he designed a belt sander," Ms. Kuster says. "He made a few for his friends, but then things took off, and Kuster Manufacturing got into the business of crafting these huge belt sanders for cabinet makers. He did that for a while, but unfortunately the design was replicated by a Japanese company and they were able to do it for much less.

"That's the way it goes," she says philosophically. "If you're making something really good, there's always a danger of it being stolen, so you just have to make something new."

The fascination with woodworking had waned anyway. Since age 19, Mr. Kuster had sustained himself as a fine furniture maker, with numerous clients in New York City. Successful enough to



Founder artisan Robert Kuster (above and facing page, top) surrounds himself with skilled assistants: experts in metal working, gifted animators and graphic artists, and other talented glass blowers.

Belle Mead Hot Glass, 884 Route 206, Hillsborough. 908-281-5516; Studio and gallery hours are Monday-Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. [bellemeadhotglass.com](http://bellemeadhotglass.com)





take time off and redirect his life, he fell in love with glass blowing after a course at Bucks County Community College, and began taking class after class, including workshops at Wheaton Village in Millville, Urban Glass in Brooklyn, Pittsburgh Glass School and Corning Glass in Corning, N.Y. He also sharpened his skills with annual visits to Murano, Italy, absorbing the karma of that country's ancient glass-blowing masters.

"He said to himself, 'That's it, I'm going to build a studio,' and so he did," Ms. Kuster says.

It was a natural progression for a man who, since childhood, had been able to build just about anything, from backgammon boards to model airplanes.

The couple, who are now divorced, met at a friend's party just as Mr. Kuster was embarking on his second career. He was about to show his works at a group exhibit and needed someone personable to assist with sales. Ms. Kuster was a perfect fit and she continues to be the public face and voice of Belle Mead Hot Glass.


"I keep the train on the tracks," she says. "Bob just wants to blow glass. He's not the detail guy. His focus is on the engineering and the craft."

Ms. Kuster describes Mr. Kuster as a "non-degreed engineer" from a gifted family of engineers, artists and seamstresses. She herself was on track to be a nurse and studied for a while at the University of Rhode Island. That path didn't pan out, however, and she left the program after a couple of years.

"I'd always enjoyed talking to people, and got my skills down in sales and marketing," she says.

The business relationship with a familiar feel remains strong between Mr. and Ms. Kuster, who have two daughters. Caroline, 14, is a freshman at the Pennington School, and 11-year-old Jennifer is in the sixth grade at Montgomery Middle School. Mr. Kuster lives in Hillsborough, while Ms. Kuster resides in Montgomery.

"There's a lot of pressure because there is no steady paycheck, but things always seem to work out," Ms. Kuster says. "We run a tight ship, so we've been able to weather the storm, even when the economy was so bad. But we came through that and it's actually helped us to appreciate the good times.

"We've been fortunate," she adds. "There are not a lot of artisans who can earn a living like this." 



*Sheila Kuster, Belle Mead Hot Glass' owner, partner and CEO, allows the sun to illuminate a glass plate.*