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Warming glass for a hot market

Bend couple use eco-friendly practices to make artisan tiles

By Anna Sowa / *The Bulletin*



[Anthony Dimaano / The Bulletin](#)

Mare Schelz, 44, and Jamie "Twig" Branch, 43, owners of Bonfire Glass Tile, display some of their recycled, handcrafted glass pieces in their Bend production studio, which is at their west Bend home. The couple, who have lived in Bend about 15 years, have used earth-friendly production practices for two years to create these colorful, glistening tiles used as home accents or designs for kitchens, bathrooms, spas and fireplaces.

The Basics

What: Bonfire Glass Tile

Who: Mare Schelz and Jamie "Twig"

Branch, owners

Contact: 389-4527

Web site: www.bonfireglasstile.com

E-mail: info@bonfireglasstile.com

Employees: two

Among the sea of tiles displayed at showrooms and tile stores, one Bend couple hope their handmade, recycled glass tiles will attract more than a glimmer of notice.

Mare Schelz and Jamie "Twig" Branch are the married owners of Bonfire Glass Tile, which they operate out of their west Bend home. Their colorful glass tiles, molded into almost 100 shapes and designs, look like gemstones when set in a kitchen backsplash, shower wall or fireplace. Using at least 90 percent recycled glass that they order from Portland, the couple handcraft the tiles according to customer orders. They use earth-friendly production practices that reduce waste and limit energy consumption. Even their home production studio is constructed with recycled materials, such as an old Goody's Soda Fountain & Candy Store door and a washed-out tofu container Branch uses to measure glass shards to set in the molds.

The two-year-old business is banking on what Schelz says is the "next big thing" in home decoration trends: artisan glass.

"Glass is very hot right now," Schelz said. "Lucky for us, we came into (this industry) right as it reached the edge."

At the new Old Mill Martini Bar, Bonfire Glass tiles line the backsplash of the bathrooms. The marigold tiles are accented with martini-glass moldings that glow from the lights set behind them.

Of course, buying glass tiles made by hand is more expensive than ordering factory-manufactured tiles, the couple says. That's what puts their product in the high-end category. Costing \$10 to \$22 per tile, depending on size, Schelz and Branch's tiles are only available for retail through their 20 showrooms throughout the country in Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Rhode Island and Washington.

In Central Oregon, they are represented at Austin Tile & Marble.

Schelz has a history working with art but now primarily handles the business side of tile making. Branch focuses on creating and manufacturing the pieces.

Aside from the glass making, Schelz teaches art classes at local private schools and has a T-shirt-making business, and Branch owns the mobile blade-sharpening business, Never a Dull Moment, for which he drives around in a converted ambulance.

The tiles they make range in size from 2x2 inches to 3x8 inches. They are offered in 12 colors available in iridescent - like mother-of-pearl - or sea glass, which looks like glass that's been washed along sandy beaches. Each tile is unique; no edges are perfectly cut and tiny seed bubbles are suspended under the surface.

Most glass tiles made by other, larger companies are created in "hot shops," which are energy-gobbling studios that melt glass pieces and then pour the molten glass into plaster or graphite molds to set, Branch said. Once cool, the plaster is usually smashed away from the glass, revealing the finished piece.

At Bonfire Glass, however, Branch operates in a "warm-glass" studio, which uses much less energy and waste to create the products.

Branch creates clay molds that he can use over and over again. To create a tile, he cuts a thin, colored

piece of nonrecycled glass to fit what will be the face of the tile, then fits it into the clay mold. Then he fills the rest of the mold with pieces of recycled clear glass.

The glass-filled mold is then put in a kiln set at a low 1,500 degrees, which melts the glass smooth. What comes out is a nonporous tile that is harder than marble but softer than graphite, which means it needs no sealant and won't corrode in outdoor or indoor settings.

Bonfire Glass Tile was recently recognized for its environmentally friendly practices on the glass-tile industry Web site, [www .aboutglasstile.com](http://www.aboutglasstile.com).

Q: How do most customers use the tiles?

A:Twig: Most are considered border-type tiles - I deal mostly linearly, opposed to by the square foot or yard.

Mare: You usually see them in kitchens, fireplaces or bathrooms ... just these accents or liners you'd have in a room. We don't do field tile, which is just the flat tile. People can get cheaper field tile and then accent it with our glass tile. That makes it sparkle and gives it that shiny, glimmery look.

Q: Which designs are most popular?

A:Mare: The wave is the most popular.

Twig: I also do a lot of spirals and 2x2 (inch) accents.

Q: How are the products earth-friendly?

A:Twig: The Northwest has lots of glass avenues for us, as far as buying glass - there's a lot of post-industrial recycled glass (we get) from Portland. We appreciate that aspect, plus the lower energy of just running the kiln.

Mare: We are Blue Sky powered (through Pacific Power, which means they pay more for each electricity bill to go toward renewable energy options).

Twig: The molds are low-cost, and we reuse them.

Mare: The beauty is we don't have to have molds made by other companies. Most companies have molds made out of graphite, and we make them out of clay. Graphite molds cost a lot, and they take a lot of energy to make. We figured out a process to use ours again and again.

Q: How do you see the business growing?

A:Mare: We hope that this business will sustain us someday. I hope we grow slowly and steadily, becoming a business that we can have as we age.

Twig: As far as going with glass tiles, I hope we do it until we stop enjoying it. Our plan now is to keep it, develop it and create more art with it. We probably will, in the future, have employees and get a bigger studio.

Q: Why did you get into the glass business?

A:Twig: We have two children (boys ages 7 and 10) and we try to spend as much time as we can with them. Our studios are right out the back door and we're able to work and have a good family life as well.

Mare: I did glass-blowing in college and did a little bit here in Bend, and now I teach art at a few

different private schools. I always wanted to get back into glass, and this is a great avenue to get back into it.

The tiles are beautiful and functional. I love the way that they're so luminescent, and it's just clear beauty.

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