

CHARLES SCHULZ AT 100: *SONOMA CELEBRATES THE LEGACY OF THE PEANUTS CREATOR* P. 94
HOLIDAY SPARKLING WINE P. 30 / HANDBLOWN GLASS ART P. 132 / NEW LIBERTY DUCK COOKBOOK P. 34

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A Clear Focus

Glassblower Michael Dickinson brings sparkle to the holidays at his Sebastopol studio.

by **MATT VILLANO**
photography by **EILEEN ROCHE**

ENTIRE WORLDS OPEN UP at artist Michael Dickinson's glassblowing studio and gallery at The Barlow in Sebastopol. Inside the 740-square-foot space, guests step into a wonderland of glass art: delicate holiday ornaments, stunning champagne flutes, jewel-toned wine glasses—even handblown glass marbles that encase a swirl of mesmerizing colors like something out of the deepest corner of the galaxy.

Dickinson's studio space and gallery, Dickinson Glass, is a don't-miss at the holidays, when the artist showcases not only his own one-of-a-kind creations, but curates displays of other glass art and ornaments for the season. And when Dickinson is not creating or exhibiting art, he brings his passion for glass alive by teaching. His studio offers regular classes in beginning glassblowing and art glass, and he rents out bench space to other aspiring artists. "I see this is the ultimate space to share a passion for glasswork," explains Dickinson. "Being able to create, working with my hands, and the meditative aspect are all reasons I love what I do."



Dickinson grew up in San Mateo, where his parents owned a commercial glass business. As a child, he watched his parents create custom shower doors, glass windows, and other accent pieces. Most of the work created by his parents was flat, but Dickinson became captivated by the challenges and design possibilities of three-dimensional work.

In his late teens, he took a glass-blowing class in Berkeley and quickly became hooked on the creative prospects of the material. He rented a spot at a local studio and learned as much as he could from other artists. Eventually, the artist developed his own signature patterns for his glassware, a series of delicate, wavy patterns based on mathematical graphs that open up a feeling of movement and warmth. "It's always been so cool to me that you can melt glass and change its form," says Dickinson. "I've been lucky to be able to build a career around it."



A caddy on artist Michael Dickinson's workbench holds works in progress and tubes of borosilicate glass, his primary raw material. Below: Dickinson uses a benchtop torch to work on a custom ornament. The torch's flame reaches 4,500 degrees Fahrenheit.



Dickinson uses calipers to make sure the foot of a piece of stemware measures up. Below: Delicate handblown champagne flutes and cordial glasses sparkle for the holiday.

Dickinson and his wife, Nicolette, first fell in love with Sonoma while visiting friends in the area. They found space in The Barlow in 2021, first opening the glass art gallery and later, Dickinson's public studio and teaching space. The couple have turned the growing business into a family affair: Nicolette, a former preschool teacher, now helps run the gallery, and the couple often bring their daughter, Luciana, now almost a year old, to work during the day.

Visitors often catch Dickinson in the middle of production. He manipulates the hot, molten glass with special propane oxygen torches that shoot out flames at a temperature of more than 4,500 degrees Fahrenheit. His raw materials include an array of colorful stock tubes and rods of borosilicate glass, which is harder and stronger than typical glass.

Dickinson says his favorite things to create are drinking glasses of every shape and size, from brandy snifters to champagne flutes. The unique vessels have developed quite a following with design-savvy Californians—Hollywood producer Jerry Bruckheimer recently bought a set of 80 custom glasses for his home. Dickinson says creating drinking glasses is a process that requires his full, total concentration. It's a challenge to make each glass a uniform height, as each finished glass's stem, foot, and vessel are made separately and then fused together by a torch. "If you're not focused, it gets messed up, and you have to start over," Dickinson says. "I come in here to make glasses and I'm totally zoned out of everything else when I'm working."

The glasses are spectacular, but Dickinson's galaxy-like marbles are a creation unto themselves. He creates the marbles, which look almost like black holes, by heating clippings of gold and silver coins and trapping the smoke vapors they release as they're heated inside multiple layers of glass. Each individual piece can take anywhere from two to eight hours to create, depending on the size.

While part of the space is a showroom for Dickinson's own work, and, occasionally, the work of other glass artists he admires, his studio takes up over half the space. The studio and gallery are separated by a glass wall created by his father at his parents' glass-manufacturing space in San Mateo. The studio also has workstations that Dickinson uses for beginner glass art classes.





An Ornament Extravaganza

Dickinson Glass is partnering with 2BGlass in Sacramento to host “The Ornament Extravaganza” on December 3 and 4, featuring over 2,000 handmade holiday ornaments for sale from 10 artisan glassblowers. The event will be held in The Barlow’s event space, a short walk from the main gallery.

For those who would like to try their hand at glass art of their own this holiday, Michael Dickinson is planning special classes in ornament making. In the two-hour class, guests will experiment with making glass icicles and candy canes to take home; a more in-depth four-hour class will also explore changing the dimension of the glass by blowing a glass bubble and adding color. For class dates, prices, and sign-ups, please visit the website.

Dickinson Glass at The Barlow, 6770 McKinley St., Sebastopol. Open Thurs to Sun., noon to 5 p.m. and by appointment. dickinsonglass.com

In the new year, Dickinson hopes to broaden his schedule of classes and continue to rent out bench space to aspiring artists and others who have taken his glassblowing classes and want to grow their skills—just as he once did. He also hopes to branch out into lighting, specifically large-scale statement chandeliers and other art pieces.

He also wants to continue working on smaller art glass pieces, including those he makes each year to decorate his family’s Thanksgiving table. Dickinson has a tradition of creating a unique wine glass for each family member and friend who gathers for the holiday, a piece that each guest can take home at the end of the meal. “What I love about glass is that there’s really no limit to what you can create,” he says.





Exploring The Barlow

Glass artist Michael Dickinson and his wife, Nicolette, love to bring their baby daughter with them as they explore the scene in The Barlow market district. Here are a few of their go-to spots:


Barrio

Dickinson and his wife love the rustic Mexican cuisine at this walk-up spot near the community market. Dickinson, who mostly eats vegetarian food, calls the veggie burritos here “absolutely phenomenal.” *6760 McKinley St., Sebastopol. 707-329-6538, barriosebastopol.com*

Fern Bar

Stunningly creative cocktails and mocktails for a date night, and the most beautiful indoor hanging garden around. *6780 Depot St., Sebastopol. 707-861-9603, fernbarn.com*

Crooked Goat Brewing

On Dickinson’s first-ever visit to The Barlow in 2019, he and his wife attended a dog birthday party at the local brewery—and ended up falling in love with the scene. They started exploring nearby spaces to rent, and their gallery opened the following year. *120 Morris St., Sebastopol. 707-827-3893, crookedgoatbrewing.com* 

The front gallery at Dickinson Glass at The Barlow. Owner Michael Dickinson and his father built the gallery’s custom shelving by hand.