

## BOTTLING A VESSEL

*The craft of building ships in bottles*

**DAVID LAVOIE SITS ON A STOOL AT HIS** desk, surrounded by handcrafted tools: a mangled lawn mower rod, a straightened coat hanger and an elongated pair of tweezers. He gingerly lifts a clear, miniature bottle to the light, peeking in through the penny-sized hole of the bottleneck.

"Piece by piece," Lavoie says in a thick Boston accent.

Carefully, he places a handmade wooden mast through the bottleneck with the precision of a surgeon.

Lavoie, a shipwright and vice president of the Ships in Bottles Association, has constructed more than 100 ships in bottles.

In Whatcom County, the creation and sale of ships in bottles is a dwindling art, says Mike Kimmich, co-owner of Pacific Marine Gallery in Bellingham. Despite this, 4,000 shipwrights, or craftsmen such as Lavoie, worldwide have a passion for the construction of ships in bottles.

Lavoie's process for building ships is known as the modern method: the shipwright builds the boat outside the bottle, takes it apart and reassembles it inside the bottle using precise tools. The old process, known as the seaman method, requires the builder to create collapsible parts that will fit through the bottleneck.

The smaller the bottle, the greater the challenge, Lavoie says. He has created ships up to nine inches in length, he says.

"Once you have the ship built, you just cross your fingers and say, 'Well it's going to fit in there,'" Lavoie says with a laugh.

The space in the bottle should be 95 percent filled with the vessel, Lavoie says. The procedure requires the shipbuilder to adhere to the dimensions of the bottle in order to place the dismantled ship in the upright position inside the bottle.

"It gives me a sense of satisfaction to see the expression on people's faces when they take a look and say that they can't believe something



like that was done by hand,” Lavoie says.

In addition to being constructed in bottles, ships can also be built inside other objects, including pocket watches.

Terry Butler, home hobbyist and president of the Ships in Bottles Association, crafted a ship inside a pocket watch that became an important centerpiece for the movie, “The Good Shepherd,” a film produced and directed by Robert De Niro.

The trinket was intended to be a gift to the prop master of the set, but it became such a hit that the prop master featured it in more than four scenes, Butler says.

“Everybody — the producers, Mr. De Niro — went crazy for the thing,” Butler says. “They loved it so much they rewrote scenes around it.”

Butler advised the team about the process of building ships in bottles and even taught actor Matt Damon how to place a ship into a bottle, she says.

“[Matt Damon] was lighthearted about it,” Butler says.

While teaching Damon how to insert the ship

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into the bottle, Butler says Damon flipped the boat inside of the bottle and exclaimed, “Oh, man overboard!” before attempting it again.

Although the ship inside the pocket watch was an appreciated novelty in “The Good Shepherd,” Whatcom County is experiencing a decline in the local construction and sales of ships in bottles.

The decline is partly due to the influx of retirees moving to the area who are seeking to downsize, which affects the art market, Kimmich says. The popularity of ships in bottles also depends on the year.

“[Ships in bottles] are cyclical-type items,” Kimmich says. “Some years they are in vogue and some years they are not.”

At his store, Kimmich sells hand-blown, glass ships in bottles crafted by local artist and Coast Guard Captain Chris “Bear” Yoho.

Yoho sells his creations for \$150 each at Kimmich’s store and the Bellingham Farmers Market.

“I would make them all of the time if I could,” Yoho says. “But it’s not something everybody wants. They like them. They appreciate them, but it’s not a big seller.”

Even though it is a dwindling craft in Whatcom County, shipbuilding continues to bring joy to those who construct the tiny novelties.

Lavoie, once again, brings the bottle to his eye as the light reflects off the pristine, Italian glass onto the canvas sail.

“When I look through the bottleneck, I can almost transpose myself and put myself on the deck of that vessel,” Lavoie says.

Lowering the bottle to his workstation, Lavoie picks up the straightened coat hanger and uses it to tenderly guide the last piece of the timber hull through the mouth of the bottle. **K**

*(below) Yoho’s glass bottle art pieces can be found at Pacific Marine Gallery on Holly Street near downtown Bellingham.*



**STORY BY SIGOURNEY GUNDY**

*Photos by Meaghan Flesch*

## SHEEP TO SHOP

*Local spinners create yarn from wool*

**THE SCENT OF HAY WARMED BY THE SUN LINGERS** in the barn as a flock of sheep spring up to the fence in hopes of receiving a treat from their approaching owner. Yvonne Madsen extends her arm past the eager animals, reaching under them to offer a green alfalfa cookie to a little black sheep waiting patiently for her turn.

Nuzzling her nose into the palm of Madsen’s hand, the black sheep, named Olive, makes an approving “baahing” noise as she munches on the cookie.

“She’s a good girl,” Madsen says, looking fondly at her sheep.

Olive has a special coat of wool that fades from black to grey. Inside Madsen’s yellow farmhouse, a soft shawl knitted from Olive’s unique wool hangs delicately draped over a coffee table that sits next to an old wooden spinning wheel. Without the spinning wheel, Madsen would not have been able to turn Olive’s wool into soft strands of workable yarn.

Spinning is a process that takes the fluffy wool coat worn by a sheep and turns it into colorful strands of yarn to be sold in shops around the world. Madsen’s sheep Olive is one of the 3.7 million sheep that were used for wool production in 2013, according to the United States Department of Agriculture.

Placing one bare foot on the wooden lever, Madsen begins to rhythmically pedal her leg up and down, setting her spinning wheel into motion. She allows the wool to glide through her fingers before it

wraps around the wheel, turning from black fluff into long strands of smooth yarn.

“Spinning is rare — it’s one of those things you don’t find everywhere,” Madsen says. “It’s a niche market. There aren’t that many of us.”

Madsen and her husband, Doug Madsen, own Spinners Eden, a small farm in Bellingham and home to 38 California Variegated Mutant Romeldale sheep, each of which they know and call fondly by name. Sheep at their farm are primarily used for their uncharacteristically soft wool, Madsen says.

In order to get the wool from sheep to spindle, a shearing process must take place. Once a year, Madsen uses a large razor to remove the wool in as close to one piece as she can. Shearing is like a choreographed dance meant to cause the sheep as little stress as possible, Madsen says.

Once the sheep are sheared, Madsen cleans,

*(below) Using an antique spinning wheel, Yvonne Madsen creates unique strands of yarn from the wool of one of her Romeldale sheep, a breed used for their soft coat. The sheep’s wool is multi-colored, which creates gradient-colored yarn.*

