



DO WHAT YOU LOVE, THE CUSTOMERS WILL FOLLOW:

## Mission Guild Studios

**I**N THE PICTURESQUE TOWN of Mount Vision in upstate New York, a husband-and-wife team of Roycroft artisans spend their days doing what they love—creating hand-crafted tiles, jewelry, furniture, pottery and artwork. Like their predecessors in the Arts and Crafts movement, Christie Schorf-Miller and James Miller of Mission Guild Studio find natural inspiration all around them. Theirs just happens to be a bucolic setting in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains. They both firmly believe they're doing what they were meant to do, where they were meant to do it. But a destiny fulfilled doesn't just fall into your lap. Sometimes, you might have to bus your fair share of tables to get there.

Christie, born into an artistic household, always felt destined to a life in the arts.

"My mother was a painter. We were always painting and drawing, crafting," she says. With her mother's encouragement, Christie pursued an education in the arts. It was while she was earning her second art degree and working in a restaurant part-time that she met her future husband, James, who was working as a chef. He'd already



earned his degree in architectural design. When these two creative forces got together, they discovered an equally strong entrepreneurial spirit. They decided to start their own business—a restaurant in Cooperstown, N.Y.

"James was the cook, seafood was his specialty," says Christie. "I ran the show—I managed the floor, the finances, and the staff."

But they couldn't keep their creative side from seeping in; creating an inviting space was as important as serving inventive dishes. "We did all the interiors, artwork, tiled the tables... everything was very artistic."

But after five years of running a successful restaurant, they were vaguely dissatisfied with the repetitive nature of the work. Something was missing.

### Taking a Chance on Happiness

"We knew we didn't want to do that for the rest of our lives," says Christie. "We had a friend who was an avid collector of Arts and Crafts with the most wonderful pottery collection. I just loved the matte feel of the glazes, the nature aspect of the pieces. I had a background in clay. I started to think about pursuing tile and started experimenting carving my own tile molds. I found I really had a knack for it."







James had the same passion for building with wood, but running the restaurant left little time to do what he really loved. They threw caution to the wind, sold their popular eatery and started a new business: Mission Guild Studios. That was twelve years ago, and they haven't looked back since.

Living in a town of just over 1,000 may be peaceful, but a retail space just wouldn't be a practical way to sell their wares. James and Christie meet most of their customers over the Internet, and the rest at the six or so Arts and Crafts shows they travel to each year. They've found that customers have a strong emotional reaction upon walking into the Mission Guild booth.

"People will relate to a piece—they remember the days gone by. They might have a childhood story. When they buy from us, it's personal; they're buying something that will become a focal point of their home—tile for the fireplace. It's gratifying to see them relate to our work."

#### Destiny Fulfilled

Mission Guild's motto is "forward thinking in the craftsman tradition." "With that in mind," says Christie, "we took the foundations of the Arts and Crafts era—the joinery, the look—and we took it to the next level."

Today, the Roycroft Renaissance artisans offer an almost impossible array of handcrafted work. But one thing they don't do is reproductions.

"We don't do any reproductions. We feel we're more artisans than craftsmen; we have to put our own artistic nature into each piece. If it's our own, it's going to be more personal to someone. Gustav Stickley is who he is because he did his own thing...Mission Guild is who we are because we do our own thing."



The couple inspire each other with brainstorming sessions, recording sketches and descriptions in art journals to keep track of all the ideas they have. Even after leaving the restaurant business behind, there are still not enough hours in the day to bring all those ideas to bear. But at the end of the day, they're glad they took a gamble on their happiness.

"We work hard, but we can step outside, breathe the air, take a moment to enjoy the garden. Of course, it's not nine to five—we work a *lot*. But it's a very rewarding life."

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