

# montecito JOURNAL

Winter/Spring • 2018/19







Noel Bendle

# JEWELS & GEMS

BY JAMES BUCKLEY

PHOTOS BY EDWARD CLYNES

## THE STONE CUTTER

Silverhorn has been in Montecito for more than 32 years and counting. Their first outlet was a small showroom at 1155 Coast Village Road in front of what was Espresso Roma and is now the home base for Manchester Capital. Silverhorn eventually took over the entire front, back, and second story of what had been many different shops, including the home for the late couturier Luis Estevez.

At the end of last year, Silverhorn decided that rather than renew the lease on its former building, they would downsize and alter the

concept of how they retail their product. Owners Carole and Mike Ridding, in something of retirement mode, have recreated Silverhorn as a design studio making personalized treasures based upon customers' needs and desires. And a big part of that retail alteration will be the inclusion of a design workshop in the heart of their new store, also on Coast Village Road.

German-born Noel Bendle will continue to head up Silverhorn's small staff of jewelers and craftsmen, but now his work will be behind a wall of glass and in full display.

## JEWELS & GEMS

During a leisurely conversation with the master stonecutter-goldsmith, Noel reveals that he was “born in a small town about an hour west of Frankfurt, close to the French border.” That town is Idar-Oberstein, famous worldwide for its stonecutting and jewelry work. The River Nahe, which runs through Idar-Oberstein, is the force behind the wheels that cut the hard stone agates found and mined in the region for hundreds of years. The agate mines finally were exhausted by the late 1800s and the town’s fathers had to search for new sources for material to keep the stonecutting equipment working.

The solution was to buy product from Brazil, where German ships were making one-way trips with German product but returning empty. The town fathers made a deal to bring raw stones back from Brazil to Idar-Oberstein.

After 12 years of school, Noel began an apprenticeship as a goldsmith in a high-end jewelry shop. “I was always working with my hands, making little boxes; I was always drawn to such things,” he says. His father was an engraver, so it runs in the family.

As an apprentice, Noel attended trade school and worked under a master for three and a half years, where he was “paid very little, not enough to survive” – but it was a trade-off, since his schooling was free.

At the end of the three-and-a-half-year apprenticeship, Noel was required to design and plan out a piece that he would make for the shop where he worked. His “master piece” was a wristwatch case in which the watch could pop out of its case and be used as a pocket watch.

He was hired full-time by Hans Cullmann, the company where he apprenticed and a company with a wide reputation for quality. “Everything to this day is made by hand there, such as clasps, chains, watch cases, bracelets, et cetera. They make all their jewelry for their retail shop,” Noel says with some pride.







After “two or three years,” however, he was ready for a new challenge. Mike Ridding, who often traveled to Noel’s hometown, examined some of Noel’s drawings and decided Noel would make a good fit for Silverhorn. “Mike always keeps his eyes open for talent,” Noel says. Mike guaranteed Noel a job if he came to Santa Barbara. He did, in the summer of 1997, and he’s been with Silverhorn ever since.

## WORKING ON DISPLAY

When Silverhorn re-opens, Noel will be working behind a wall of glass alongside longtime craftsman Darby Farmer instead of a closed door. I asked if he was worried that something that happens in the store may take his mind off of what he is working on in the studio. “I’m separated by glass,” he says, “so I don’t think I will be disturbed; it would be kind of like a restaurant with an open kitchen,” he suggests.

Noel arrived in the U.S. as a single man. Soon after, he married a Pennsylvania-born woman and they are now raising their three children, all girls. The youngest is ten years old.

As for the products they’ll be fabricating at the studio, Noel





explains that unlike many jewelers, “the stone is the most important part of the piece, rather than the setting.” Noel and his team look to create items from Mike’s large collection of rare and high-quality colored stones. “We try to make a piece of jewelry that showcases the stone, bringing out specifics or colors.”

Customers can, however, bring in their own stones. If there are flaws, Noel will point them out, but he says it’s not a problem to work with whatever the customer wants. “Sometimes it has sentimental qualities,” he notes, adding that, “no jewelry is good that sits in a box at home. Jewelry is made to be worn. And hopefully, we create a piece that is timeless and that you can pass on to the next generation.”

When asked to name the three most important tools he possesses, Noel quickly names them: “Hammer, pliers, file. That’s what I use for the most part.” He still has the wooden-handled hammer he used on the very first day of his apprenticeship.

“Gold is very soft, and if you hit it off-center, you dent it. But if you hit it straight-on, it doesn’t dent. When I hit something, I always hit it dead on,” he explains. He has favorite pliers that he’s grown fond of “and when they break, it’s painful,” he says, laughing. And then there are the files, “many files, round, square, triangular, flat... There are many different pliers too, but there is only one hammer,” he says with a broad smile.

There is also only one Silverhorn too, though in two locations: at the Biltmore Four Seasons Hotel and at the new Studio at 1235A Coast Village Road. You can drop in and watch Noel and Darby at work, or call them at (805) 969-0442.

**m**

