

The Sweet Smell of Success

A SOUTH SALEM COUPLE TRIES A NEW BUSINESS AND EMERGES SMELLING LIKE ROSES.

By Laura Kenyon

When some women go to dinner parties, they show up with a freshly baked cake, a bottle of wine, or the latest hors d'oeuvres from Martha Stewart. But when Deborah Michel pops in, she comes totting 10 tiny vials filled with 10 versions of her latest scent-in-progress—from peony to pomegranate, Christmas tree to Lavender Fleur. Passing them from nose to nose, she listens intently to her friends' comments before crowning one worthy enough to bear the Michel Design Works name.

Deborah and her husband, Bruce, co-founders of the South Salem-based company, have it all: their own business, a cozy 18th-century colonial house in the country, a big healthy family (three kids, an Australian shepherd, and three cats), and the best commute in Westchester County—just steps down a cobblestone pathway.

Over the last two decades, they have nurtured what started out as Michel Publishing, a stationery, diary, and note-card company, into Michel Design Works, a rising member of the global gift industry. While retaining its quirky, unique identity, the company has doubled its sales in the last three years by adding baby items, home décor, scented soaps, lotions, candles, and room sprays to its inventory. And the packaging of its products is so attractive, they don't even need to be wrapped. Soaps come in cigar-box-shaped cases covered with ornate designs. Body lotions are in containers inspired by London buildings and topped with braided tassels. Baby onesies and bibs squeeze into retro tins modeled after 1930s food cans. Hooded towels and wash mitts for babies come in lunchbox-like containers covered in pastel polka dots. And nature-inspired note cards are bundled into boxes that even a librarian could mistake for antique novels sitting on a shelf.

Deborah finds inspiration from things others might pass over as shabby—a scuffed-up old suitcase, a water-

stained sepia photograph, a cracked picture frame. Deborah sees these as gems of the past, full of history and romance. Gathering them all up, she flips, squashes, contorts, miniaturizes, and otherwise manipulates the objects in order to produce her art.

"I look at things that exist and ask, 'What's the idea here?' and reinterpret old objects to make them modern," she says. And high quality: their soaps are triple milled and their candles are made of clean-burning soy-wax from a renewable natural resource.

Michel Design Works products have been featured in publications such as *Town and Country* and *O, The Oprah Magazine*. (And we all know everything Oprah touches turns to gold!) Its products are sold around the world, online at Amazon.com, and in more than 4,000 stores in the U.S. In Westchester, products can be found at Nordstrom in White Plains, Blush in Rye, Weinstein Pharmacy in Katonah, Marmalade in Chappaqua, Cherry Lawn Pharmacy in New Rochelle, Enchante Limited in Bronxville, and Town Center Pharmacy in Armonk

Deborah and Bruce Michel have nurtured a home-grown business into a global gift enterprise.

