



MADE IN AMERICA

# HEART OF GLASS

FROM THE BODY OF CHEVROLET'S CORVETTE  
TO YOUR AVERAGE COKE BOTTLE, TOLEDO,  
OHIO, PRODUCED SOME OF THE 20TH  
CENTURY'S GREATEST WORKS OF GLASS.  
NOW, AFTER AN EXODUS OF FACTORY JOBS,  
A GROUP OF YOUNG ARTISANS IS RESTORING  
THE SPIRIT OF GLASS CITY—ONE HAND-BLOWN  
WHISKEY TUMBLER AT A TIME

*By Marissa Conrad • Photography by Maddie McGarvey*



Gathered studio assistant Jessica Brodersen dips a steel blowpipe into the furnace, which can reach temperatures twice as hot as a pizza oven

One warm June evening on the rooftop of the Renaissance Hotel in Toledo, Ohio, Adam Goldberg maneuvers a steel pipe into a furnace glowing the vibrant orange of an Aperol spritz. Inside, a crucible contains 100 pounds of molten glass. Swaying his hips to a down-tempo cover of “Everlasting Love,” Goldberg spins the pipe, collecting gobs of fiery syrup the way a carnival vendor

spools cotton candy around a paper cone. Twenty-three guests face him from an arc of tables; 23 phones capture photos for Instagram. Place settings cradle menus made of glass, etched with course descriptions. “Bluefin tuna: shaved truffle, carrot, radish.” The night is a singular kind of dinner theater: Every other course will be cooked directly on, in, or with the aid of hot glass pulled from an oven maintaining a temperature of 2,150 degrees Fahrenheit. (For comparison,

the towering brick oven at a Neapolitan pizza parlor only hits about 900 degrees.)

Goldberg, 30, co-owns Gathered, a glassblowing studio in downtown Toledo named after the industry term for that molten bouquet of hot glass: a gather. Experiential dinners are new for Goldberg; he and business partner Mike Stevens spend most days making the colorful bowls and glasses that draw passersby into their retail shop, across from the city’s minor league baseball stadium. But

whether they're serving hotel guests or Mud Hens fans, the mission is the same: "We want the community to experience glass," Stevens says, sitting on a bench in Gathered's workshop three months after that first dinner in June. "A lot of people come in and say, 'I've never seen glass blown before.' And they've lived here their entire lives. That's crazy." He pauses. "Because this is the Glass City!"

A Toledoan who doesn't know glassware is like a Detroitier who doesn't know cars. The story starts 130 years ago, when local leaders convinced businessman Edward Libbey to relocate his New England Glass Company (soon-to-be the Libbey Glass Company) to a site on Toledo's Maumee River, with the promise of minable natural gas to fuel his factory's furnaces, access to high-quality silica sand, and a \$100,000 bribe. Toledoans were elated. Before the factory was even up and running, local newspapers hyped their city as the place "where glass is king," writes historian Barbara L. Floyd in *The Glass City: Toledo and the Industry That Built It*. Within a decade, another major manufacturer, the Edward Ford Plate Glass Company, had purchased a 173-acre campus directly across the river. In 1903, Libbey plant manager Michael Owens invented the automatic glass-forming machine, which could mold four glass bottles per second—a rate six times faster than what workers could produce by



Adam Goldberg cradles a gather, the molten glob of glass that inspired the name of his studio. Below: Toledo Glass Company workers pose on a giant sheet of glass in 1914.

hand blowing. Owens then founded the Owens Bottle Machine Company (which would become Fortune 500 behemoth Owens-Illinois) and joined forces with Libbey and Ford to create the Libbey-Owens-Ford Sheet Glass Company and with New York-based Corning to launch Owens Corning Fiberglas.

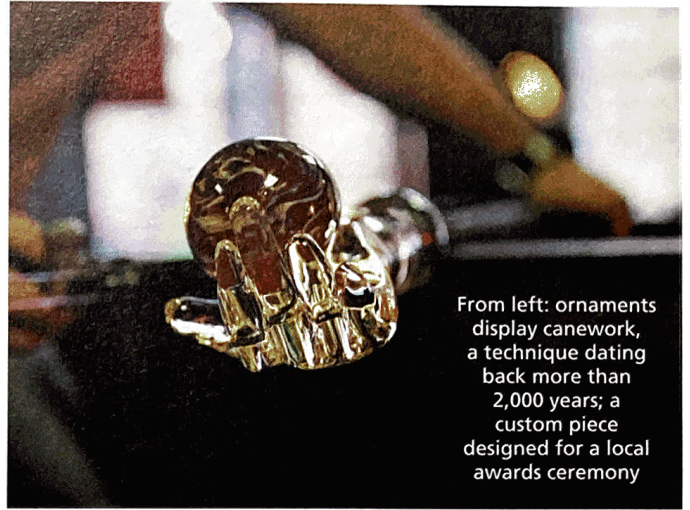
By 1950, Owens-Illinois was on its way to exceeding \$1 billion in annual sales, and Owens Corning was developing the fiberglass body of Chevy's first Corvette. Toledo's mayor was

awarding glass keys to the city (still a tradition today) and unveiled an Amtrak station with a 50-foot-wide glass map depicting Toledo as the center of the world. The city's glass would eventually ascend beyond the bounds of Earth; when Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed on the moon, their spacesuits were made of "Beta cloth," a high-tech fabric woven with filaments of Owens Corning fiberglass.

*A Toledoan who doesn't know glassware is like a Detroitier who doesn't know cars.*

Then, in the early 1970s, Glass City began to crack. Local industry flagged in the face of the 1973 oil crisis, the subsequent economic recession, and increasing pressure to take business overseas, where labor was cheaper. Owens-Illinois succumbed to a buyout in 1987 by the New York investment firm KKR, slimming its Toledo workforce to just 3,400 people by 1990—a 40 percent reduction in staff compared to a decade earlier. British firm Pilkington bought and carved up once-thriving glass conglomerate Libbey-Owens-Ford,





From left: ornaments display canework, a technique dating back more than 2,000 years; a custom piece designed for a local awards ceremony

eliminating numerous jobs and moving others abroad. Between 1970 and 1998, Toledo lost nearly 25 percent of its population, roughly 72,000 people. Today, 45 percent of the world's glass is manufactured in China. Even the curved glass for the Toledo Museum of Art's \$30 million Glass Pavilion, opened in 2006, came from Shenzhen.

At Gathered, more than jump-starting Toledo's manufacturing sector, Goldberg is preserving the city's identity—that glass-key-giving, headline-bragging, mural-unveiling pride. Yes, independent glass artists have been making beautiful work out of Toledo since the studio furnace debuted at the Toledo Museum of Art in 1962. “But it was all happening behind closed doors,” Goldberg says. Gathered, which offers classes to amateurs and lively demos with beer for guests, puts glass back in the public eye. “I think we’re a part of telling people that yes, glass is still Toledo,” Goldberg says. “Toledo is still glass.”

A Toledo native, Goldberg graduated from Bowling Green State University, 20 miles south of the city, in 2011 with a concentration in glass. His grandfather, who owned a local produce company, offered him an abandoned warehouse to convert into a studio. He recruited Stevens, his friend and classmate, to help knock out the interior walls to create Gathered. “We came here three days a week before school, and we would just throw on jumpsuits, take sledgehammers, and go crazy,” Goldberg says. The com-

pany's opening party drew 400 people, with guests spilling onto the street. The block, long empty, felt alive; shortly after, a bar opened two doors down.

Over the past six years, Goldberg has watched Toledo's art scene transform, thanks in large part to the Arts Commission of Greater Toledo, which runs Art Loop, a monthly party that brings Toledoans into local artists' studios, and Momentum, a three-day art festival in September that features glassblowing demonstrations, competitions, and parties. Programming aside, the city has also been able to attract artists with a necessary and increasingly precious resource: room to experiment.

“Where else could I do this?” asks Alli Hoag, the head of the glass program at Bowling Green who just bought

a 2,400-square-foot barn that she's converting to a glassblowing studio, and who developed a technique for unusually delicate glass casting, making butterflies with paper-thin wings. Joanna Manoussis, a British expat, uses studio space at the Toledo Museum of Art to make labor-intensive work like *Bottled Pear*, a series of glass pitchers filled with ghost-like outlines of the fruit. She's represented by a gallery in New York, where private collectors have paid \$15,000 for her work. Meanwhile, Goldberg is focused on making “art that you can use every day,” he says. One of his watercolor

tumblers is \$32; a rocks glass, cheekily sloped at sixty degrees in a nod to what some say is the ideal temperature for drinking whiskey, is \$60.

Between online sales and orders from design shows, Goldberg, Stevens, and team members Ryan Thompson and Chris Demuro are making pieces in the hot shop roughly six hours a day, four to five days a week. Simple glasses take 15 minutes; a more intricate project, an hour or more. Their other major focus is public art. In 2015, Gathered completed a massive installation at the Toledo Zoo: a 9-by-38-foot map of the world composed of more than 1,300 hand-cast glass tiles, and at the Toledo Hospital they installed a 30-foot line of 30 tiles that fades from cobalt blue to deep purple, meant to mimic the X-ray portion of the electromagnetic spectrum.

They also make the hand-blown glass tumblers one woman is eagerly photographing at the June dinner. At the next table, a group takes whiskey shots. Goldberg holds a rod topped with molten glass and plunges it into a steel mold, its negative space the shape of a five-point star, and blows. When he removes the glass, it looks like it came straight out of the Milky Way. Hips swaying once more, he uses the red-hot star to sear, branding-iron-style, 23 fat pieces of tuna.

Later, he admits that in his daily life, he rarely cooks. “Some advice I was given once was ‘Take the job, and then figure out how to do it,’” he says. “Say yes, and you’ll make it happen.”

*“Glass is still Toledo. Toledo is still glass.”*

**HOLY TOLEDO:**  
GATHERED GLASSBLOWING  
STUDIO IS JUST ONE  
MILE FROM THE  
TOLEDO AMTRAK STATION,  
A STOP ON THE CAPITOL  
LIMITED AND LAKE SHORE  
LIMITED ROUTES.