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Hot Glass

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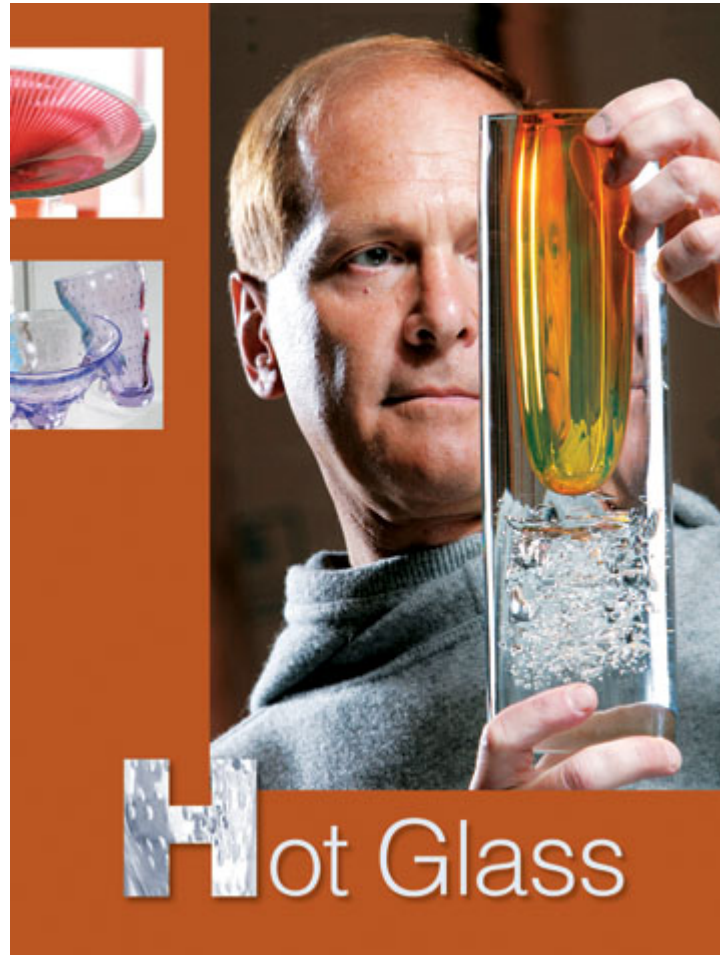
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When Raymond Berger '70 decided to leave a thriving merchandising career to launch his own company, all he needed was a great idea.

He found it in the Czech Republic.



By Dick Anderson

Photography by Jim Block

Growing up in Manhattan, Raymond Berger '70 was drawn to the department store displays of New York City's retail giants — so much so that he would go home and reimagine their windows. "I remember going to Brooks Brothers, which had an eight-story building in New York, and I used to rearrange the floors for productivity — like why would they have a whole floor for hats and luggage and only half a floor for university wear?" says Berger, who exchanged several letters with the retailer. "I'm sure it was coincidence, but soon they expanded university wear to a full floor and cut down hats and luggage from a floor to a little boutique."

A born merchandiser, Berger spent the better part of three decades divining trends and developing products for some of the nation's premier retailers. His Berkeley, Calif., home — built in the aftermath of the 1991 fire that decimated the Oakland Hills area — is filled with

organizational knick-knacks from his Williams–Sonoma days, cookware collections from his stint at Marshall Field’s, and dozens of prototypes and production samples from his latest business venture. Now, however, the business belongs to him.

For the first time, Berger — together with partner Alex Shapiro — is working for himself as head of Alchymie Praha, a company created to market handmade contemporary glassware designed by leading Czech artists. Alchymie Praha (Czech for “Prague Academy”) cemented its arrival as a player in the world of retail glassware by signing a two-year, 10-market exclusivity pact with Neiman Marcus to carry the entire line. “It’s a great partner in terms of prestige and volume,” Berger says. Since hitting store shelves in June with Neiman Marcus and five other retailers, Alchymie Praha has added 30 more retailers — from the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, to a tabletop store in Waupaca, Wis., to Gump’s, the San Francisco institution. The affordably priced, signed-and-numbered collections are not only finding favor among consumers, but they have also energized the Czech Republic’s decorative glass industry and provided a new audience for talented artists whose work was previously unknown in America.

For Berger and Shapiro, the task of launching their maiden entrepreneurial venture in recessionary times clearly entailed risk. While a number of their friends with retail backgrounds suggested that they delay their start until the economy improved, the partners persisted, and they’ve learned a lot in the last 12 months: “We originally thought that, in addition to Neiman Marcus, we needed only 25 other accounts,” Berger says. “The truth is, we probably need 50. Next year, we need 125 accounts. We now know the importance of trade shows and direct selling.”

One of the earliest believers in Alchymie Praha was the late Minor Myers jr., with whom Berger developed a friendship as an alumni volunteer. “He encouraged me to utilize my experience and passion to develop this business,” Berger says of the Illinois Wesleyan president, who died in July. “It is rather amazing that even after 30-plus years from graduation, IWU can still have an impact.”

Berger recalls that he applied to Illinois Wesleyan on the recommendation of his older brother, a mathematics professor at Yeshiva University in New York City. “Illinois Wesleyan was a highly recommended school, but something of a secret,” he says. Although he appreciated the change of scenery, Bloomington’s small-town confines took some getting used to, Berger admits, and he frequently made weekend trips to Chicago “when I felt the need to get away, explore the big city, and look at the skyscrapers.”



Above, Berger and partner Alex Shapiro review potential design patterns at their Berkeley, Calif., home and business.

A history and political science major at IWU, Berger campaigned for Bobby Kennedy in Indiana in the 1968 Democratic presidential primary. Traveling by bus to Indianapolis on the weekends, the Illinois Wesleyan volunteers would show up neatly groomed, wearing blazers, while their counterparts from other schools had long hair and ripped jeans. Consequently, Kennedy's campaign team would send Berger and his schoolmates to knock on doors in the wealthiest neighborhoods "because we were well-dressed," he says with a laugh.

Political activism notwithstanding, the sartorially correct Berger had long decided that he was going into retailing. And when he graduated from IWU, the mecca of merchandise was Bloomingdale's, whose chairman, marketing legend Marvin Traub, "really made it an extraordinary New York institution," Berger says. He walked into Bloomingdale's flagship 59th Street store in Manhattan, met the vice president in the men's store, and enlisted in the executive training program as an assistant buyer of men's shoes. Concerned about their son's 14-hour days, his parents urged him to quit the business after several months, but Berger was hooked.

He spent 10 years at Bloomingdale's, eventually becoming a merchandise manager for retail foods. From there, it was on to Marshall Field's, where Berger helped reestablish the chain as the premier retailer in the greater Chicago area. Working in high-end giftware, he grew the lamp business from \$2 million to \$8 million in sales in eight years, even though the high return rate on broken or damaged goods dampened his enthusiasm for the product: "Operationally, that was a nightmare."

After Marshall Field's was sold to Dayton Hudson and Berger's job was eliminated, he moved to California to work for Williams-Sonoma and spent another five years with the Concord-based chain Beverages & More. Most recently, Berger was brought in as a consultant to help the Medford, Ore.-based retailer Harry and David retool its confectionery line for the mall crowd, stumping the country, calling on buyers, and opening the doors to 2,200 department stores nationwide. Along the way, "I discovered that I actually enjoyed selling product and working with retailers," Berger adds, and the experience gave him the confidence he needed to start a business. All he needed was the right idea.



Samples of Alchymie Praha's glassware (above) catch the light — and shoppers' eyes.

That idea originated with Shapiro, who has spent most of his career in nonprofit management for the Lighthouse for the Blind, the AIDS Foundation in Chicago, and the Northern California Cancer Association. About seven years ago, the Columbia University graduate became fascinated with the art of glassblowing (“Hot glass,” he says, “is an addictive medium”), and he developed his skills at Public Glass in San Francisco, one of a handful of public-access facilities in the nation devoted to glassblowing, casting, and glassworking. Shapiro eventually became president of the board of Public Glass and has sold his own glass jewelry collection, Alex Shapiro Designed, to the Chicago Botanical Gardens.

The lightbulb came on by way of the Czech Republic, a major glass center for hundreds of years (dating back to Bohemian crystal) and the center of the contemporary art glass movement since 1958. Just as Sweden’s Kosta Boda reinvented its centuries-old business by producing contemporary collections of hand-tooled original glassware in Swedish factories for distribution worldwide, Berger and Shapiro saw an opportunity to work with leading and emerging Czech artists.

Through his work with Williams– Sonoma and Beverages & More, Berger already had contacts in the Czech Republic — agents who understood packing, shipping, and quality control issues. In September 2002, he and Shapiro made an exploratory trip to the Czech Republic. They spent a day with Frantisek Vizner, the country’s most prominent living glass artist. “Mr. Vizner was frustrated that Czech artists had not gotten worldwide recognition for the extraordinary contemporary work they had done,” Berger says. “He had all these artists he had turned out academically, but without a market for their product they would end up working in factories.”

By the end of their visit, not only was the 67-year-old Vizner on board as their lead artist, he was spreading the word about Berger and Shapiro’s venture in the artistic community and bringing key talent to the table. “Our vision is that each artist would select a workshop (or factory) that would reflect their artistry and aesthetic, and we found that there were a sufficient number of workshops that do handmade work throughout Czechoslovakia.”

Things moved quickly from there. By the end of October, they had developed prototypes of five collections (two by Vizner) with four artists. In November, they had a meeting with Neiman Marcus, whose vice president of home decorating, Al Oliver, “was incredibly excited by it,” Berger says. “Their direction to us was we needed to move faster — that five collections were fine, but they wanted 10 for 2003.” What Neiman wants, Neiman gets: Nine months after their initial visit to the Czech Republic, Alchymie Praha delivered its first product to stores in June — and by the end of October, Neiman Marcus had 10 collections on its shelves.

In turn, Neiman Marcus has been very supportive with its marketing efforts, devoting a page in a recent catalog and an article in its *InCircle* magazine to Alchymie Praha. Vladimir Klein, the company's second-most important designer after Vizner, will visit Neiman Marcus stores in Atlanta, Dallas, and Bal Harbour, Fla., in December, while Vizner plans a stateside trip next spring.

Other than direct selling, the bulk of Alchymie Praha's new business can be traced to gift shows. Last summer, shows in San Francisco and New York opened up 25 new accounts, and while Berger will add shows in Atlanta and Dallas to his itinerary, "New York is still the center of the retail industry," he explains.

While the Vizner collections have been Alchymie Praha's biggest success both in dollar sales and in opening new accounts, the biggest surprise in unit sales is the less-expensive Hands, a vase created by husband-and-wife artists David Suchoparek and Ingrid Rackova featuring the creators' actual handprints imprinted on each piece. The popularity of Hands has cut across a wide range of retail demographics, from No Place Like, a contemporary store in Chicago, to the UNICEF Gift Shop in New York. And while Neiman Marcus wondered if Hands was too contemporary for its typical customer — 42, female, and wealthy — the first stores to sell out were in the conservative strongholds of Atlanta, Dallas, and Bell Harbor, Fla. While it's marketed as a bridal gift in Atlanta and Dallas, it functions as contemporary art in Boston, where a pair of vases sold at a silent auction benefit for \$2,500.

Alchymie Praha may have caught lightning in a bottle yet again with a new collection called Water Grass, which began generating reorders soon after its rollout in October. "*Water Grass* is our first collection that really transcends the aesthetics of the contemporary," Berger says, crossing over to clients with traditional tastes such as the San Francisco Museum of Fine Art. "It appears to have a very wide market, which is terrific for us." In addition to expanding the line to include stemware, barware, and serveware, Berger has asked *Water Grass* creator Eva Svestkova for a second collection with similarly broad appeal. In addition to including more offerings below \$200, "Our goal is to introduce five or six new collections in 2004 and drop one or two from 2003 that haven't sold so well," Berger says.



Berger gives Berkeley gallery owner Secrea Palat (left) a look at a sample from Alchymie Praha's new Water Grass collection, which has quickly become one of the company's best sellers.

In September, as the partners reviewed slides of the new *Water Grass* collection for the company brochures and Web site (www.alchymiepraha.com), the discussion turned to their travel-heavy schedule. Shapiro was headed to San Diego and Hawaii to meet with Neiman Marcus managers

and salespeople to launch Alchymie Praha in those markets. “Alex can bring the glass to life to the consumer or the salesperson at Neiman’s but I’m better at closing the deal with the retailer,” says Berger, who was busy following up with prospective customers before taking off for the Czech Republic in early October to fine-tune the spring 2004 collection as well as attend the International Glass Symposium in Prague. (Consequently, he had to miss IWU’s Homecoming, for which he served as committee chair this year.)

There’s a lot more to selling glassware, of course, than scoring frequent flyer miles. While they run the business from their home, Berger and Shapiro lease a small space at San Francisco’s Pier 23, where they spend hours packing and shipping items each week. On a typical day, Berger is jockeying for shelf space with retailers, dusting the merchandise on their shelves, and dealing with the 23 bowls that arrived broken because of inadequate packing, “which was deadly painful because they all were sold,” he says.

Reflecting on the previous 12 months, from broken bowls to cold calls, Berger calls 2003 “our learning year.” Over the next five years, he hopes to grow Alchymie Praha to a \$5 million wholesale business. That will require additional capital, and he and Shapiro plan to sell a percentage of the business to investors over the next six months. By 2005, they expect to hire a warehouse person to do the shipping and an office manager to handle the paperwork, freeing Shapiro up creatively while giving Berger more time to sell.

“Raymond really grasps what’s going to work and what’s not,” Shapiro says of his partner. “Starting the company has really brought out a lot of his sales talent.” To create a national brand and a lasting business “would be rewarding in so many different ways,” Berger admits, “not only financially, but it would be wonderful for the artists in the Czech Republic.”

As he makes the first of several trips up a steep flight of stairs to a gallery in Tiburon, Calif., arms heavy with Czechoslovakian glassware, Berger dreams of the day that Alchymie Praha will have its own retail store in New York. “I only have two regrets,” he adds. “I wish I had started this 10 years ago, and I wish I had lifted weights.”

Dick Anderson is a freelance writer in Los Angeles.