

DONALD SCHNELL

A glance behind the potter's wheel

By MAURI ELBEL Photography by TRISTAN EWALD

From the second level of the Amore Center that hovers on the outskirts of Cruz Bay's hustle and bustle, Donald Schnell works at his own pace. It's a pace that he's set, and frankly, earned—a self-actualized status of sorts that he's achieved after nearly four decades of creating a style of art that has become synonymous with St. John.

Meandering around the island's shops, resorts and villas will likely give you a taste of Donald Schnell Studio's handcrafted ceramics regardless of whether you ever set foot in his gallery. Perhaps this notoriety stems from Schnell's ability to flawlessly capture the natural essence of St. John through his unique pottery, made

from raw clay blended with Virgin Islands coral sand and adorned with recycled crushed blue glass the color of the Caribbean Sea. His work seems to be intrinsically linked to the inspiration he's found on St. John since 1975, the year he and his wife, Deborah, moved here from Chicago.



TOP A classic Schnell design: individual serving bowls, hand-formed by staff, with a ring of "caribbean magic" blue.

MIDDLE Schnell examines an almost-finished large serving bowl fresh off the wheel.

OPPOSITE PAGE This unfinished bowl is ready to receive shell impressions, between the grooved lines, that Schnell is commonly known for.

"We started making pottery on St. John, and we were so struck with the beauty of the island—it was mind-boggling," Schnell says. "It's been really inspiring to work in that kind of setting."

Just in their 20s at the time, the couple moved to St. John seeking an escape from the cold and instead found a creative environment which allowed an art form to take shape. Schnell immediately honed into St. John's unique spirit, finding a source of inspiration that has evolved with him over the years. The artist says the key to keeping his creative energy alive is to constantly travel, look and discover. He makes frequent trips to Italy's Umbria region and just recently returned from Barcelona, but the biggest testament to his unending quest to push his artistic limits is translated through his work.

"I think we get inspiration by the beauty we have around us," he says. "We have something here—our visitors, our people—there is something really special about this island that accepts what everybody does. It allows them to get started and experiment and get to the next level. It has been this kind of atmosphere that has allowed us to grow—and it has been a fertile place for us to grow."

Before surrendering to island life, Schnell was an assistant professor of social work at the University of Chicago, where he met his wife who worked as a pediatric nurse. Born, raised and educated in Michigan, Schnell grew up on a farm where he developed a passion to build, create and design. When he moved to Chicago to pursue his graduate degree at the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration, his desire to design finally aligned with his artistic talents, allowing him the opportunity to study under the renowned modernist ceramic sculptor Ruth Duckworth.



"To me, working with clay was just always natural and fun," says Schnell. "Most people think of clay things as objects, but Ruth taught me a whole new way of looking at the art. She was really a living treasure of an artist."

In Chicago, Schnell shared a studio with around 30 other artists of different mediums. It was during a studio class he was teaching when he heard about the Virgin Islands from one of his students.

"We thought we would come down here," he says. "Maybe give it a try."

In 1975, the Schnells opened their first shop on St. John—a 100-square-foot gallery in the heart of Cruz Bay where Crazy Crackers stands today.

"Those were special days; very fun days," recalls Schnell. "We were right next door to Miss Meada and Miss Myrah. Those two ladies ruled the town, and they would always watch the shop for us. We might sell \$200 worth of pottery a day, and back then, we thought we were rich."

Just two short years later, Donald Schnell Studio relocated to Mongoose Junction to be the anchor tenant as Glen Speer built out the retail center. For a couple of years, the Schnells traveled back to their studio in Chicago, but eventually their growing business and family helped them make the decision to relinquish their chic Chicago loft and subscribe to island life full-time.

"We were getting busier, more established, and all of the sudden, we had two kids to think about and our business at Mongoose was really starting to take off," he says. "Life was good. Life still is good."

From water fountains, lights, signs and planters to vases, musical wind chimes and dinnerware, Donald Schnell Studio's creations have become somewhat of an artistic staple on St. John. Most of the island's villas bear signs reflecting the character of their name with unique motifs, lettering and numbers created out of the artist's signature Caribbean blue recycled glass. His ceramic sconces, embellished with

shell motifs, and decorative lighting that merges Caribbean influences with Italian travertine and terracotta adorn the island's villas and resorts while his serving dishes are cautiously stowed away within the locals' cabinets. Over the years, these signature creations have not only claimed their place on St. John, but have also taken root throughout the Caribbean and beyond. Schnell's creations span from some of the Caribbean's finest luxury resorts throughout the British Virgin Islands to Richard Branson's sprawling house on Necker Island and the Fairmont Mayakoba Resort in Cancun, Mexico.

"Sometimes, you are more famous in other places than on your own island," says Schnell.

But anyone who knows St. John is likely familiar with Schnell's work and family as well. The Schnells raised their three children, Abigail, Lucas and Michael, on the island. Recently, two young grandchildren have been added to the mix—a topic that brings a wide smile to Schnell's (or rather Gran Don's) face.

In 2002 the Schnells purchased the Amoré building, and in 2006 they opened their new studio and gallery space, moving on from Mongoose Junction after more than a quarter century. With their three children grown, out of college and back on the island pursuing their own lives and careers and other businesses to tend to—the Schnells also run Artistic Villas and operate a car rental agency—the Amoré Center has provided them with a pace of life they can now enjoy. While they no longer entertain the high traffic they once did at Mongoose Junction, they relish in the freedom and pace of life that comes from doing what you love.

"It's a little more mellow here," Schnell says. "We don't have to be open all the time and I get to call all the shots. We've taken a few steps back, and while it has certainly been a change for us, this is a wonderful place and we feel like we are part of the community here."

The building, bedecked in Caribbean coral and stone and beautified with commissioned artistic touches, is one of Schnell's proudest design accomplishments and now serves as a one-stop shop consisting of a gallery, workshop, oven rooms, an office, a packing room and even a nursery for the grandbabies. After 38 years of creating art on St. John, Schnell says he feels more connected to the community than ever before as he works from the downtown space he re-designed.

"It is our family building, and we are honored to have a space we are committed to making our own," he says. "We are pretty happy. That's why we are establishing a strong building—we don't intend on going anywhere else."

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TOP Schnell's signature platters have a shell-impression border and a splash of Caribbean blue and are available in his gallery in Cruz Bay. **CENTER TRIO** Artist Donald Schnell at his pottery wheel: centering the clay, opening the clay, and then shaping it. **BOTTOM** A 1970s Schnell-created wall sculpture hangs in the upper level hallway of the Amoré Center.

OPPOSITE PAGE
LEFT Schnell carving a house sign for a villa. **TOP RIGHT** The artist pressing shells into clay to create his signature border. **BOTTOM RIGHT** Schnell trims excess clay off a thrown bowl to make a foot.