

# 2009 Art Glass Invitational

by Adam Villarreal



Photography by Jeff Zorn

August 20, 2010, saw the return of the Art Glass Invitational (AGI). Started nine years ago, the AGI carries on a rich tradition of the free exchange of ideas among the glass community. Affectionately dubbed “glass camp” by attendees, the event is held on acreage in the rolling hills of rural Western Pennsylvania owned by Tom and Elaine Doner (aka The Wonkas). Complete with a fully painted school bus in the style of the Partridge family, the facility is the culmination of each AGI past. Nearly every year a new feature or building is added to the facility in the spirit of improving the AGI experience.

## Expanding Glass Horizons

The intent behind AGI is best described by the Wonkas themselves in their mission statement. “Our goal is to promote the free exchange of information in an effort to expand the horizons of glass workers from all skill levels and areas of experience.” This is accomplished admirably at AGI, and every attempt is made to provide a fun, comfortable environment that fosters collaboration. The entire week was filled with excellent food, demos, conversation, and all of the amenities you could ask for. On the upper floor of the Lewis C. Wilson Building is the Bill Rasmussen Lounge, equipped with A/C to beat the heat. A hotel is located close to the property, but the best option by far is the campsite up the road. A log cabin complete with iron forge run by Big Dan awaits at the campsite. The wake-up call is provided via cannon fire at around nine, just in time for pancakes.

Entrance is limited to sixty-five lucky souls who receive a golden ticket from Mr. Wonka. Every year the Doners have a lottery drawing from the pool of those who have reserved a space to determine who comes. Half are taken from newcomers and half from previous attendees. Mr. Doner explained that this infusion of new blood ensures the continued vitality of the AGI experience.

## Learning from the Best

The first day started in the afternoon to accommodate people who were arriving and to allow for setup and for greeting friends. Salt and Alex Ubatuba kicked off the demonstrations. Salt shared his unique style of sculpting and answered questions on the application of complex designs and the process of making ideas come to life in glass. Alex showed us a homemade hot shop setup, challenging the idea that working soft glass with hot shop techniques is cost prohibitive. Using clever application of preexisting forms to produce equipment such as a modified keg glory hole, Alex punted up to beer bottles to show cup-making techniques. Several Moretti cane pickup vessels were made as well, further illustrating the versatility of this bare-bones setup. The garage and the glory hole were built for less than \$1,000.







This year brought many new and exciting designs and techniques. Multiple objects of a more functional flavor were made, including a lamp-worked percolating teapot made by Micah Evans and an all-glass ice-cream machine made by one of the guests, both of which were put to good use. Carmen Lozar gave a slide show lecture on the things from which she draws inspiration and demonstrated one of her blown rain goddess figures. In addition, Mike Shelbo and Tom Grimmett teamed up to discuss the intricacies of working with Glass Alchemy Boromax frits. Tom lectured on color chemistry while Shelbo crafted one of his famous goblin heads of the extra-large variety.

The talented Julie Riggs showed the techniques behind her latticework skull pipes, complete with vertebrae stem. Don "Fyrsmith" Parker showcased a new gauging tool of his own design used to create glass-on-glass bottle stoppers. Matt Eskuche also demonstrated several time throughout the week, showing classic forms such as goblet feet and tops while emphasizing fundamentals and the importance of building up hand skills. As well as having a passion for glass working, Matt also has strong views on conservation and took it upon himself to organize a recycling effort for the event.

## Well-Deserved Recognition

On Wednesday August 19 the newest building addition to the AGI facility was dedicated to Barry Lafler. Involved in glass for thirty-five years, Barry's contribution to both the scientific and artistic communities has been formidable. Winner of the 2004 J. Allen Alexander Award, Barry has been a member of the American Scientific Glassblowers Society since 1981. He has held many posts in the organization, including that of president, from 1999 to 2000. In addition to being a fixture in the lampworking community, Barry is a swell guy to boot. Fellow AGI members illustrated their affection by hoisting a giant white cardboard replica of Barry's signature mustache over the entrance just in time for the building dedication.

AGI is quite a packed week, with something to do or see from beginning to end. Thursday night the first-ever AGI Bite-Off was held. This was a friendly competition to see who could reproduce another artist's style with the greatest accuracy. Thursday was also hat day at the Bodyshop. On Friday the world-famous Puff Danny held a poker night challenge complete with rap battles and high-stakes glass betting.

The food provided for the guests was sublime, the meals showing both culinary talent and a good bit of kitchen creativity. Organized by head chef and glassblower Kevin, both vegetarian and nonvegetarian cuisine was made available. The *pièce de résistance* was an entire side of pig, which was basted and slow-roasted over the course of the final day.

## A Grand Finish

The final night of AGI was filled with celebration, and smiles from ear to ear were a common sight. The Glory Hounds played on as the party kicked into full gear. Between the barbecue dribbles and the clinking of freshly kilned beer glasses, it was easy to see why this event means so much to all who attend.

Tom emphasized the meaning of family several times throughout the week. So much effort by so many parties has gone into making this event what it is. Whether it be sponsors, demonstrating artists, cooks, or general helpers, great lengths are taken to make it feel as though when you come to AGI you have come home.

AGI is many things to many people. To the younger crowd it is a wonderful way to learn and network, and for the demoing artist it is a way to not only promote yourself but to foster growth in the community. For the seasoned veterans it offers a great glass-themed vacation where the pressures of production can be put aside and creative energies can be rekindled. Most importantly, all of this happens in a friendly, casual environment, where you don't have to be afraid of trying something new. Among everyone attending there are literally hundreds of years of glass experience floating around AGI. It is a place where the intellectual and creative resources available make truly anything possible. At AGI, we are all teachers; we are all students.

[www.glass123.com/AGI.html](http://www.glass123.com/AGI.html)

