

ANTLER



ART

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LIGHT SHOW A Ken Kenia one-of-a-kind chandelier.

ON POINT Ken Kenia's creations include candleholders, side tables, lamps, bottle openers and stoppers, and his specialty, chandeliers.



Ski-town dwellers are always on the hunt for “freshies”—fresh, untracked snow. Say the word and everyone immediately knows what you mean. But when Ken Kenia says freshies, it means something altogether different. In Kenia’s world, freshies are antlers collected the same year they are shed.

If they’re freshies, they’re grade-one.

As an antler artist, Kenia only cares about the freshies. Grade-two antlers are older and bleached by the sun, while grade-three are rotting and critter-filled. Those won’t do for Kenia’s creative antler products—floor and table lamps, chandeliers, sconces, candleholders, wine racks, and tables. He is a perfectionist and the antlers must be in near-new or mint condition if he’s going to spend the time to create a functional sculpture that someone else would want to install in his or her home.

This year marks Kenia’s 10th year in business at Mad River Antler, located in Waitsfield, Vt. Originally from New Jersey, Kenia navigated the corporate rat race until

9/11 forced him to re-evaluate his goals and lifestyle. An antler artist friend in New Jersey introduced him to the craft, and Kenia’s life and career took a 180-degree turn. After coming to Waitsfield every weekend to ski for 20 years, he and his family moved to the Mad River Valley full time, and instead of donning a suit and tie every morning, Kenia puts on a pair of jeans and walks 100 feet to a studio and workshop he built specifically for his business.

The studio looks like a typical woodworking shop, except for one thing—it overflows with antlers. The inventory—moose, elk, whitetail deer, and mule deer—hangs from walls, is stacked on shelves, and packed in boxes. All are naturally shed, and come from the Northeast and Montana. Kenia buys them by the pair or the pound from professional antler trackers who use dogs to sniff them out. The animals shed their antlers and grow new ones every year, so in a sense, antlers are a renewable resource, and no animals are ever harmed in the collecting of sheds, also called “drops.” >>



BALANCING ACT Ken Kenia at work in his studio and workshop.

“The animals tend to follow snowmobile trails in winter, and they start shedding at the end of January,” Kenia said. “Many who collect them are retired people who just love doing it, and some are pros who train their search dogs to find them. They are all very good at it, and I have three or four sources in Vermont.” Kenia said he’s fortunate that he’s still able to get moose antlers, because the number of moose in the state has gone down due to a devastating tick infestation. Vermont only had 73 moose taken last year during the official moose hunting season, and Kenia is not sure what the future is for moose and their antlers.

Kenia’s signature pieces are chandeliers, which range from 25 inches to 52 inches in diameter. He creates them based on the size of the room where they’ll reside. When he starts the building process, he begins from the bottom and builds up. “I’m really particular about balance and symmetry,” he said. “Each piece is totally different from any other. You need a number of antlers in inventory so you can find ones that go well together. It’s not like you can run down to the hardware store and buy more. The hardest part is getting antlers to work with each other and fit together.”

Once Kenia has the antlers picked out and placed in position he drills holes along the veins where blood used to flow. It’s a delicate maneuver, but the end result is hidden wiring that feeds assorted light sockets made from short stubs of antler pieces. “The moose antlers are the hardest to drill, elk is easier, and deer is easiest,” Kenia said. Like a pre-fab kit, he screws all the pieces together. Then he feeds the electrical wiring through the antlers, attaches the sockets, fills any holes with a filler, and uses a finishing product to enhance the antlers’ natural hues. The last step is to spray the entire piece with a matte finish for protection.

Kenia’s pieces range in price from \$95 for a wine rack to \$7,000 for a large chandelier that includes antlers from all three species and can take up to 10 days to finish. Most of his business comes from Vermont, New Hampshire, the Adirondacks, and Lake George, although one of his biggest orders came from Singapore. That customer was doing business in New Hampshire and visited Kenia’s studio. He bought two chandeliers and four sconces, all custom-made.

Kenia also does the craft-show circuit and a few farmers markets in Stowe and Waitsfield. “Craft shows have been beneficial and I really enjoy the people I meet. You run into really creative people, and I’ve teamed up with different artists. One woman makes lamp shades with botanicals fabricated into them that go really nicely on my lamps.”

The Stowe Foliage Arts Festival, held annually in October, is where Sandy and Brian Huber first discovered Mad River Antler. “We were renovating our home and Brian wanted an antler chandelier, but it was just not my style,” Sandy said. “Then I started seeing them out West



Kenia with one of his chandeliers at Sugarbush Resort.

and I liked them. I was worried they would make the house look like a hunting lodge, but I found that mixing a contemporary look with something more rustic is a nice combination. It gives our house a mountain-home feel.”

The Hubers met with Kenia at the Stowe Foliage Arts Festival and discussed their options. “That same afternoon, after the show, they brought a smaller chandelier >> 136 to our house and hung it, but it was too small for the space,” Sandy explained. “So he took measurements and created a bigger one. It totally made the room. That was in 2011 and since then I have been back for a smaller chandelier and another table-top piece for candles. Ken is very particular about his antlers and a perfectionist. I had looked out West and online for other antler artists, but they didn’t have Ken’s eye for detail.”

Back at Kenia’s studio, a robust sound system fills the space with music, and a TV hangs from

the ceiling so he can watch the game while he works on Sunday afternoons. Dog beds are scattered about for his two pals, Buddy and Gracie. Upstairs is a comfortable showroom where Kenia meets with clients and where they can see samples of finished products. A desk and computer are tucked away at the far end, where he tends to the usual details of running a business, keeps his website updated, and maintains a presence on Etsy, an e-commerce website focused on handmade or vintage items.

“I have a good internet presence. Both my website and Etsy have been beneficial,” Kenia said. “Most of my customers have theme rooms in which they’ve included my work. Sometimes they just want a piece of Vermont in their homes.”

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