

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 77 (2011)
Heft: [8]

Artikel: Glass from the Glasi keeps a tradition alive
Autor: [s.n.]
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-943410>

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Glass from the Glasi keeps a tradition alive



Switzerland's only glassworks has built up a remarkable reputation in the 20 years since Robert Niederer took over the factory from his father Roberto.

The proof is that almost three out of four people recognise the name and praise the quality of the small company's products, according to a survey carried out on the image of Swiss firms.

The factory - affectionately called the Glasi - has been making glass in the village of Hergiswil near Lucerne in central Switzerland since 1817 but it's only in recent years that the place has really come alive.

The Glasi features a museum on the history of the factory, with a guided tour through the factory.

You are guided on to a balcony above the very heart of the action where the glassblowers are at work in front of the oven. The heat and the sight of glass being produced in front of your eyes bring the Glasi to life.

About half of annual sales are made in the two factory outlets - one selling seconds - with the other half sold to shops around Switzerland.

But there are other attractions that make the Glasi stick out. There are a number of exhibitions, featuring what you can do with glass and light, as well as glass and sound.

Another plus is that the factory is on the shores of Lake Lucerne and has its own park with panoramic views of the local mountains.

While Niederer describes the Glasi now as a "really healthy company" it wasn't always that way. The Siegwart family, which had run the works since they opened, wanted to close it in 1975 because they were losing money.

This is when Roberto Niederer, a client of the Hergiswil factory, stepped in.

"My father could not live with the idea of "his" factory closing, so he did all he could to take it over. He never had money because he always spent it on his projects in glass but he had a lot of friends and he also found politicians who helped him," son Robert says.

"He was always near the oven with his glass blowers. That's the big difference between him and me. I'm more in the office organising things, whereas for him it was more important to work with the glass. He was the artist," the son says.

Robert Niederer son was taught the secrets of glass by his father, although under some duress because he didn't find it that fascinating at the time.

"My father was really a very strong person, a patriarch. There was no place besides him. And I always said: 'Father, I will come when you are no longer here. As long as you are in this factory there is no place for me.'"

Niederer does not produce glass with lead, arguing that he does not want to endanger the health of his workers. Most of the glass blowers in Hergiswil come from Portugal. There are now no Swiss.

The oven at the factory is on 24 hours a day 365 days a year. The temperature inside is 1,500 degrees Celsius. A total of 4,000 kg of glass is taken out daily in two eight-hour shifts. One employee works overnight putting in new sand. Apart from the sand, which comes from either Belgium or Germany, a mixture of about 15 other minerals are put inside.

Once the glass comes out of the oven and is shaped, it goes into another oven so that the cooling process is slow. If it were simply left at room temperature the glass would break.

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