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HOME

MARCH/APRIL 2011

The Road to BLISS

Bethesda's Mei Xu
builds a home
accessories empire



how
Mei Xu
found
her

BLISS

A Chinese émigrée living in Bethesda
creates a home-decorating empire

By Gabriele McCormick



From an unlikely beginning in China, Mei Xu has gone on to start Blissliving Home as well as the multimillion-dollar Chesapeake Bay Candle company.



Mei Xu, pictured here with staff members Amber Kleiner, Sarah Constantyn, Kerri Souilliard and Mareike Finck, travels the world in search of inspiration for her line of home decorating products.

On Rockville Pike near White Flint Mall, lunch-hour traffic generates a constant hum occasionally amplified by horn blasts from impatient drivers and the roar of nearby construction equipment. But up on the 11th floor of a sandstone-colored high-rise, tranquility reigns. Burning candles scent the Rockville office space with pumpkin, sandalwood and vanilla. Pillows and soft cashmere throws reminiscent of exotic destinations invite staff and visitors to relax.

In a window-lined office, a petite, dark-haired Chinese woman stands in front of a 5-foot-tall board, blissfully contemplating the array of photos, fabric swatches and materials from her latest travel adventure. From these fragments, Mei Xu, founder of the multimillion-

dollar global enterprise Chesapeake Bay Candle, will create a new line for her latest venture, Blissliving Home.

At 43, Mei Xu has traveled a vast distance, not only geographically, but metaphorically, from where she began. She lives in Bethesda's Edgemoor neighborhood with her husband, David Wang, 48, and their two sons, Alex, 10, and Michael, 9. But she grew up in Hangzhou, China, where she initially thought her life course was set. The daughter of a school principal and steel plant environmental engineer, she earned a coveted spot at a boarding school that trained diplomats, and afterward attended Beijing Foreign Studies University, working part-time as a project manager for the World Bank.

When she graduated, however, the

Chinese government assigned her and other members of the Class of 1989 to menial jobs at farms and factories in response to the Tiananmen Square student protests. She spent a month tracking mineral deliveries in China's port city of Dalian before quitting in frustration and extinguishing her hopes of ever joining the Chinese diplomatic community.

After marrying, she and Wang began the complicated process of immigrating to the United States, which Xu describes as "arduous to the point of hardship." Her college education made her an asset to the country, she says, and leaving required a tremendous amount of patience and money and the circumvention of red tape.

Finally, in 1991, the couple moved to Annapolis, and Xu enrolled in the

In 2010, the White House invited Xu to create a candle exclusively for Michelle Obama.

University of Maryland's Master of Arts in Journalism program. She hoped to work for The World Bank in Washington, D.C., after graduation, but the global recession of the early 1990s resulted in a hiring freeze there. In a tight job market, she accepted a position with a medical company in New York City, and on weekends commuted to Maryland, where her husband worked in Greenbelt as a computer engineer for a Navy contractor.

In New York, Xu often strolled around Bloomingdale's. She noticed the fashion floors were filled with chic designs by Donna Karan and Calvin Klein, but the floors selling housewares and linens were "very grandma and ornate."

"I wondered why people who wanted to dress a certain way didn't also want to live that way in their homes," Xu says.

Figuring there must be a market for upscale home goods, she and Wang resigned their jobs in 1994 and started their own company. With neither a mortgage nor a child yet, "it was the perfect time to take a risk," Xu says.

Armed with samples of silk flowers and candles sent by business contacts in China, the couple attended the September Charlotte Gift & Jewelry Show in Charlotte, N.C. When they walked away with more than \$90,000 in retail orders—mainly for candles—they knew they'd hit upon something.

The unscented, decorative white candles they sold were popular holiday gifts that year. But Xu wanted a product with broader appeal. She consulted Peter French, president of French Color & Fragrance Company in Englewood, N.J., and learned to add dyes and scented oils to candle wax. At home, she experimented with pouring brightly colored, fragrant wax into Campbell's soup cans. During the process, she neglected to add a chemical that creates a smooth



satin finish. "The candles had mottled colors and an amazing snowflake texture," Xu says. That finish became the signature style of the couple's company, Chesapeake Bay Candle.

By 1996, high-end retailers, including Bloomingdale's and Nordstrom, were selling Chesapeake Bay Candle products. The following year, Xu created a candle collection for Target. The chain's buyer forecast \$3 million in sales that first year, but after two weeks she called Xu and said, "Mei, we're in trouble." It turned out that sales were outpacing the supply. Xu stepped up production and, by year's end, sales at Target had surpassed \$8 million.

Since then, Chesapeake Bay Candle has become a global leader in the industry, with \$90 million in sales in 2009. The company currently owns two manufacturing operations in China and one in Vietnam, with more than 2,000 employees in all. A production and distribution facility is slated to open in Glen Burnie this year. "That operation will help us provide our customers [in the United States] with what they want, when they want it," says Xu, who moved to Bethesda in 2009.

Currently available through national retailers, including Kohl's and Bed Bath & Beyond, Chesapeake Bay Candle products have appeared on the pages of *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Modern Bride* and *People* magazine.

In 2010, the White House invited Xu to create a candle exclusively for Michelle Obama. The candle was included in a gift basket presented to foreign dignitaries at the first lady's farm-to-table event that September. Xu designed a cream-colored soy candle with a pattern of oak leaves and roses inspired by a frieze above the North Portico at the White House. She packaged it in a slate-blue box with the first lady's signature in silver.

Xu constantly thinks about improving and expanding her business, and often finds inspiration on the road. That's how she came up with her newest company, Blissliving Home. During her frequent business trips, she remarked that "the bedding in hotel rooms was so ugly," with rough linens and dirt-masking, multicolored bedspreads. Wanting to apply her sense of fashion and design to home textiles, she founded Blissliving Home in 2007. Her husband now handles strategic development, financial investments and business development for both Chesapeake Bay Candle and Blissliving Home. Xu works with two designers in the United States and eight in China on Blissliving Home products, which are manufactured at the company's facility in Hangzhou, China.

Blissliving Home's design style is "a global touch for the modern home," Xu says. She estimates the company's sales to be "in the millions of dollars." A catalog of home textiles and accessories for the bedroom, bath and dining area is published twice yearly, and products have appeared in *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Real Simple*, *Family Circle* and *Traditional Home*. Last year, actor Chris O'Donnell perched on a

Where to Find Blissliving Home Products

To shop the entire
Blissliving Home catalog:
www.blisslivinghome.com,
866-952-5477

For select Blissliving
Home products:

Curiosity, 1033 S. Charles St.,
Baltimore, 410-727-6262

The Great Indoors,
16331 Shady Grove Road,
Gaithersburg, 240-599-1300

RCKNDY sweet décor,
1515 U St. NW, Washington, D.C.,
202-332-5639

Urban Essentials,
1330 U St. NW, Washington, D.C.,
202-337-4462

Theodores,
2233 Wisconsin Ave NW,
Washington, D.C., 202-333-2300

com, with select products sold in specialty stores, boutiques and high-end department stores. Interior designer Katie DeStefano sells Blissliving Home throws, blankets, pillows and candles at her Baltimore shop, Curiosity. "I have to keep reordering and reordering," she says. "Their products are top quality and beautifully made. They sell themselves."

In the next five years, Xu will concentrate on retail venues and on establishing Blissliving Home flagship stores in locations such as Bethesda or Georgetown, the SoHo section of New York City, and San Francisco. "People on the [East and West] coasts are more traveled and interested in other cultures," she says of the company's demographic. "They know buying from Blissliving Home is not just buying products, it's buying a travel experience." ■

Gabriele McCormick is a frequent contributor to Bethesda Magazine.



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