



“We try to educate our customers about the time it takes. When you’re depending on a woodworker in a small shop in Pennsylvania or Ohio without a telephone who rightfully works at his own pace on a hand-tooled hutch or table, things move slowly. Our customers understand that—because the authentic product is precisely what they want.” —Jim Miller

### Handmade Good

*A Sarasota company markets Amish-made crafts worldwide*

BY LINDA FRANCES JOFFE PHOTOS BY BILL & HOPE WEST

There is more than a touch of irony in the fact that Jim and Linse Miller rely on the most modern technology to sell handmade goods that frequently take six months to create by a supplier living 1,000 miles away who may not have a telephone, fax or email.

Yet this intriguing juxtaposition of cultures is exactly what makes the Sarasota couple's online business of Amish-made furniture, quilts, crafts and outdoor products so appealing—and in less than three years, remarkably successful. Courtesy of the internet, customers as far away as Australia—and more typically New England, the mid-Atlantic, California and the Midwest—can purchase an item that they know is solid wood, handcrafted, hand-stitched and uniquely American.

The Millers and their partner, Chinese native Miao Xue, operate JMX International Corporation, a web-based business started in March of 2003. Jim grew up in a Mennonite family in Michigan and had moved to Sarasota in 1993 to become associate pastor of the Bahia Vista Mennonite Church. He was subsequently tapped to serve as the first director of Sarasota's Goshen College.

"I had dreamed about my own business and was intrigued by the possibilities of selling authentic Amish goods on a broader scale," Jim says. "When I met Miao while pursuing graduate studies at USF in Tampa, I knew the time was right. He is really the brains behind the operation, since I knew next to nothing about website development. He makes things happen." Fittingly, theirs is largely a "virtual relationship," with Miao traveling between Tampa, France and China.

Today they operate more than 12 websites, including Dutchcrafters.com, featuring Amish-made furniture; MillerStore.com, featuring Amish crafts; and GardenTones.com, which sells patio furniture, lawn decor and garden structures.

They also sell model ships imported from the Dominican Republic, which are handcrafted, plank-on-frame construction and available in a variety of sizes and styles at [Oceanfare.com](http://Oceanfare.com).

The quilts were Linse's idea.

"We were traveling through Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and I passed a sign that said 'quilts,'" she says. "I went inside and met one of the Amish quilters. I was so impressed with the quilts, how beautiful they were, and such works of art. I felt it would be a great addition to our product mix." Thus was born Quilts by Linse.

Like the other products, the quilts can be purchased on the internet, at [QuiltsByLinse.com](http://QuiltsByLinse.com). They can also be viewed in person at their gallery on the corner of Proctor and Swift roads, aptly named Quilts by Linse. The space houses their offices and growing staff of eight, including their most recent addition, Debra Gingerich, who grew up in a small Mennonite community in upstate New York. She and her husband moved to Sarasota in search of warmer climes, and chanced upon the Millers' ad for a communications manager. It has been a perfect fit.

"We all felt that a retail presence was appropriate for Sarasota," comments Gingerich "There is a long history of Amish and Mennonite activity here, plus the arts are so prominent. We really wanted to do something different with the retail space. Unlike other shops that typically fold their quilts on racks, ours hang on the wall like a gallery would display its work. A lot of local quilters stop by, and they are thrilled that we are presenting them as art."

Open since Christmas 2004, the gallery attracts visitors who come mostly by word of mouth. It has also become a place of interest for members of the local quilting guilds. "Although 90 percent of our sales are online, it's really important for us to have