

# Metal, Fire, ‘Hitting Stuff Hard’: Everybody Wants to Be a Blacksmith Now

Hobby crafts are growing in popularity. Sometimes they include anvils and fire.



By Amelia Nierenberg

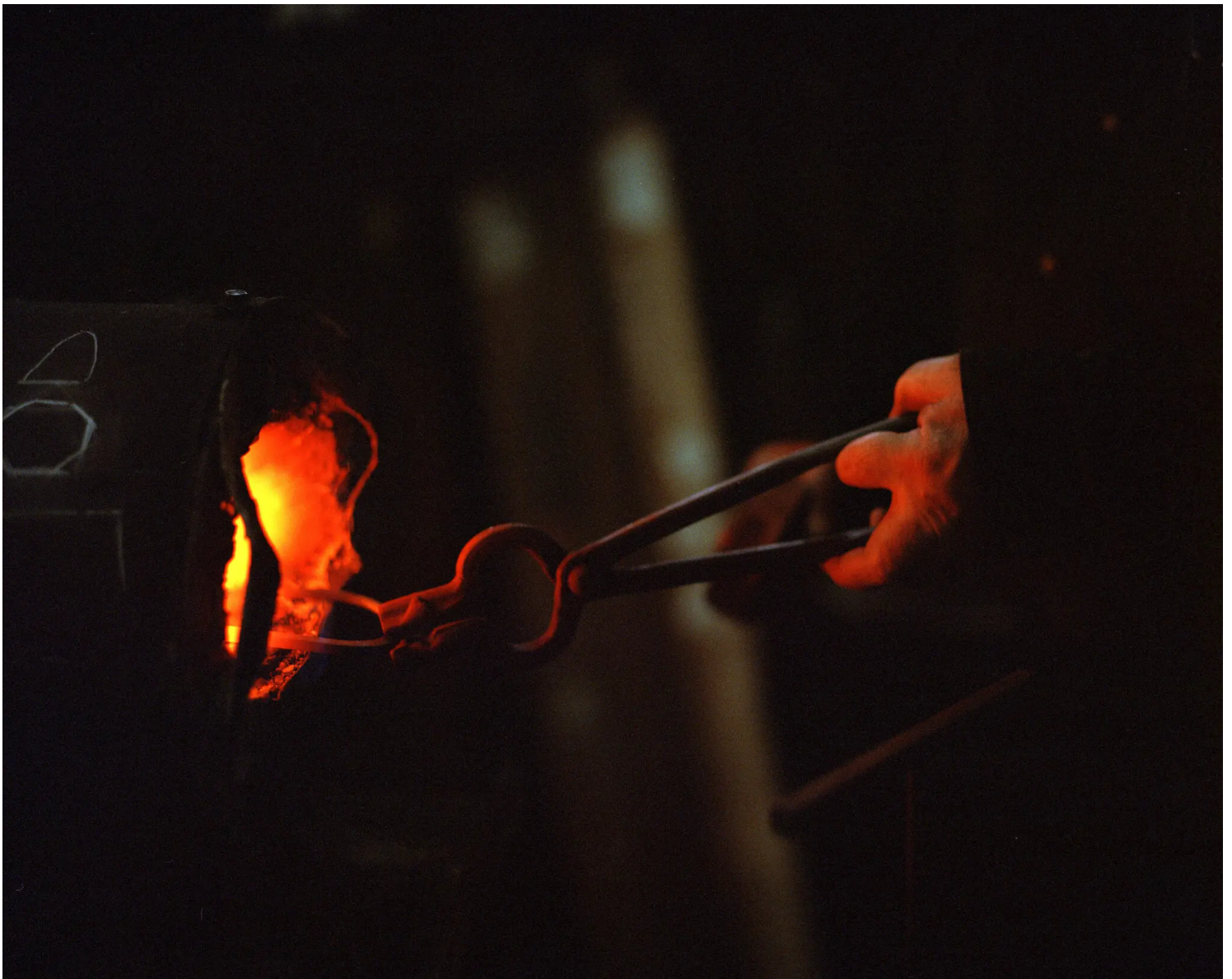
Reporting from Brookfield and Wolcott, Conn.

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The amateur blacksmiths were hard at work: heating metal rods, then hammering them into shape. Reheating, hammering some more, twisting and bending, and finally, hours later, creating small metal hooks.

It was hot, slow, painful work. For some, it was also thrilling.

“Metal and fire and hitting stuff hard? You can’t go too far wrong,” Chris Doherty, an artist and blacksmith in Brookfield, Conn., said as he watched his students work on a recent Saturday morning.





Chris Doherty places one of his students' hooks into the fire, heating it up enough to bend and manipulate the metal. Jordan Semanick for The New York Times  
 Amateur blacksmithing has gained traction in recent years. (So has bladesmithing, the art of making knives and daggers.) Weekend classes can fill up months in advance. "Forged in Fire," a bladesmithing competition show on the History Channel that has inspired many hobbyists, keeps getting renewed. And as more enthusiasts join the fray, the price of anvils has risen.

"We can't offer enough intro classes," said Matthew Berry, who owns Dragon's Breath Forge in Wolcott, Conn., with two other champions of "Forged in Fire." An introductory class costs about \$185 per person.

"I'll typically book out two to four months in advance," said Brandon Hyner, 25, another blacksmith in Connecticut. He usually works in New London and charges about \$275 for a half-day intro class. "I fill up every time."

Interest in blacksmithing is part of a broader rise in hobby crafting that started well before the sourdough starter craze during the coronavirus pandemic. Some people have learned to throw clay or make their own suits; others bend iron over an anvil and weld pieces of steel together.

"It's all things that make us use our hands, make us use tools, make us master something that seems beyond us at first," said Elizabeth Kronfield, director of the School for American Crafts at the Rochester Institute of Technology.



Mr. Doherty teaches in an old wooden forge, stuffed with old metal tools and rods, at the Brookfield Craft Center in Connecticut. Jordan Semanick for The New York Times



Jessica Socha bends a metal rod to form a hook during a blacksmithing class. Jordan Semanick for The New York Times

Blacksmith work can be more dangerous than other crafts. For some students, that intensity is the draw. They are tapping into a historical past — maybe even a mythical one — where strength came from fire and metal.

"Harnessing that fire is something that's beyond the normal, everyday human experience in the United States," Professor Kronfield said.

"You're bending steel," she added. "You're Superman for the day."





Blacksmithing tools and creations at the forge in Brookfield, Conn. Jordan Semanick for The New York Times

Mr. Doherty teaches in an old wooden forge at the Brookfield Craft Center in Connecticut. It is stuffed with old metal tools and rods. His course is living history, taught over a weekend, for about \$300.

On the first day, his students make a curved and twisted hook, then a leafy key ring fob. The next day, they combine the two skills to make a steak flipper, a long hooked tool with vines wrapping around the handle.

“It skews younger than a lot of the other crafts,” he said. “You don’t get a lot of 20-year-olds wanting to weave.”

Michael Klimaszewski, 34, was there to celebrate his sixth anniversary, which is known as the iron anniversary. The class was a present from his wife.

He dusted off skills from when he was an Eagle Scout. Back then, he mostly liked the banging. Now, he said, “it’s much more intentional.”

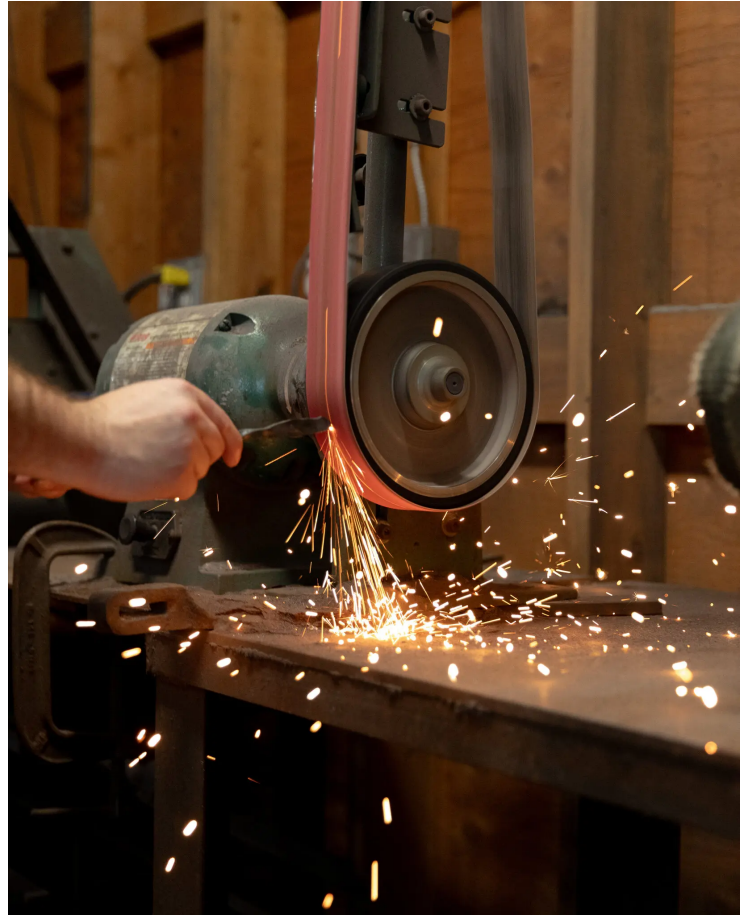
Some students said they especially valued making something with their own hands that would last.

“I grew up with mass-produced crap, things that are designed to eventually fall apart and eventually get replaced,” said Jacob Mele, 36, who attended Mr. Doherty’s class with their wife, Dr. Jessica Socha, 36. The couple were also celebrating their sixth anniversary.





An anvil at the forge in Brookfield, Conn. Blacksmithing is a more dangerous hobby than some. And for some students, that's part of the draw. Jordan Semanick for The New York Times



Michael Klimaszewski, a blacksmithing student, grinds the top of his hook. Jordan Semanick for The New York Times

As interest rises in blacksmithing, the craft is opening up more, too.

Professor Kronfield said that a blacksmithing conference she attended about a decade ago “was 85 percent white male of a certain age.” Now, she said, more women, queer people and people of color are blacksmithing than ever before.

“We just keep showing up,” said Elizabeth Belz, 36, who is on the governance committee of the Society of Inclusive Blacksmiths, which aims to diversify the craft.

Ms. Belz works and teaches in North Carolina.

“Every day, I blow someone’s mind that I’m the one that runs this shop,” she said. “Like some guy will come in and be like, ‘Where’s the blacksmith?’ And I’ll be like, ‘Right here.’ And he’s like, ‘You little thing?’”





Mr. Klimaszewski shows off the hook he created. Jordan Semanick for The New York Times

Some blacksmiths are “Game of Thrones” or “Lord of the Rings” die-hards who want to bring imaginary worlds to life.

“It’s fantasy stuff, but in real life,” said Taylor Kenefick, 30, a flight instructor and Dungeons & Dragons fan who took a recent weekend class at Dragon’s Breath Forge.

Ms. Kenefick, who is transgender, said blacksmithing offered a way to express herself.

“When I first started transitioning, I felt like I needed to perform or act a certain way,” she said. “Like: ‘I’m a girl, you know, I should wear dresses and do this kind of stuff.’”

“But then, I’m like, ‘This is not me,’” she continued. “And this is one of the things that helps — getting sweaty in here, and working.”

She bent back over her anvil, coaxing metal into a blade. Her hands blistered as she swung the hammer over and over, sharpening and sculpting the rod into a treasure to keep.

**Amelia Nierenberg** writes the Asia Pacific Morning Briefing for The Times. [More about Amelia Nierenberg](#)

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