

DESIGN & DECORATING

ANYTHING BUT PLAIN WHITE

For those who prefer studio made to mass produced, today's dish pickings are good

BY SHAX RIEGLER

ROSH HASHANA, CHRISTMAS, Hanukkah, New Years. Chances are you'll have friends and family over in the next few months, and you'll need to serve them food. But perhaps you're bored by the china you picked out when you got married, or don't jibe with a set you inherited? Or maybe you're just plain tired of plain white plates.

While many large, famous tableware companies in England and the United States have faced major setbacks in the last few years—Lenox and Wedgwood are recovering from bankruptcy; Spode and Royal Worcester live on as mere brands within a larger company—studio-made pottery coming out of small shops across the States is flourishing.

At the New York International Gift

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Fair last month, San Francisco potter Lisa Neimeth showed off her quirky, mostly made-to-order tableware to eager buyers. "Despite the economy, people have been consistently thrilled to see that there are still studio craftspeople making tableware one piece at a time," she said, noting that a lot of production work is "often passed off as handmade but is machine-made and 'hand-touched.'" And while handmade tableware can be pricey, Ms. Neimeth said, "it's sturdy enough to use every day, it's meaningful and it could become a family heirloom someday."

The Clay Studio, a top ceramics school and gallery in Philadelphia, has held many shows about functional

pieces over the years. But with "For the Table: Dinnerware," the Studio's spring exhibit of work by 42 contemporary potters, the emphasis was on the idea of commissioning, says artistic director Jeff Guido, "to show people that they could work with someone to create something totally their own." To that end, the studio has launched a Dinnerware Registry in its shop (online soon) where couples can register for handmade pieces.

The artistic forerunner of this latest generation of American studio potters was Edith Heath, whose earth-tone Coupe line, designed in 1948, epitomizes the crafty side of modernist ceramics. In 1959, the environmentally conscious Ms. Heath built a low-impact factory in Sausalito, Calif.: She sourced her clay locally, perfected a low-temperature firing technique that required less fuel for the kilns and made sure that as little as possible went to waste. But there's nothing crunchy about her elegant, simple shapes—Ms. Heath's vintage pieces in long-discontinued glazes are highly valued by collectors, and the classic design remains in production today.

But back to your dinner table. From rough-hewn earthenware to elegant porcelain, the thrill of small production is in the randomness of the aesthetic results—nothing is guaranteed once a piece goes into a kiln. There are potters who try to control the outcome and those who embrace chance and imperfection. In either case, the result is a set of dishes in which each piece has its own character and yet all mix nicely, like a well-composed guest list.

Mr. Riegler is the author of the forthcoming "Dish: 813 Colorful, Wonderful Dinner Plates" (Artisan Books) and an editor at House Beautiful magazine.



▲ Edith Heath's clean, modern Coupe line has been in continuous production since 1948. heathceramics.com



▲ Mary Alice Hadley started designing ceramics in the 1930s and set up shop in 1944. M.A. Hadley Pottery, in Louisville, Ky., still makes all of her patterns by hand. hadleypottery.com



◀ Don Carpentier uses methods and molds from the late 18th and early 19th centuries to create his vivid reproductions. The signature bold red on his slip-decorated wares is the natural color of an iron-rich clay that he gathers from a streambed in Albany County, N.Y. greatamericancraftsmen.org



▲ For her ceramics line Gleena (Russian for 'clay'), Asya Palatova uses porcelain slip glazes that are distinctively translucent. She creates her own transfer designs from vintage printed ephemera. gleena.com



◀ Michele Michael impresses cloth into soft porcelain clay to create the linen texture on her Elephant Ceramics. The resulting surfaces and shapes are always one of a kind. elephantceramics.com



Frances Palmer has a devoted following for both her made-to-order wheel-thrown and hand-decorated pieces as well as her manufactured Pearl Collection, produced in collaboration with Buffalo China. francespalmerpottery.com



▲ For her Coastal Ceramics, Alison Evans draws inspiration from natural forms she spots on walks along the shores and tidal pools of coastal Maine. aeceramics.com



◀ Lisa Neimeth presses found and vintage objects—Cracker Jack charms, figurines, twigs, string, rocks, old machine parts—into clay and traces the shapes. She then dries, sands and glazes the plates up to three times to achieve her muted matte finishes. Even after all that, the pieces are still dishwasher safe. neimeth.com