



Home Team

HEATH CERAMICS INVITES LIKE-MINDED COMPANIES TO ITS TABLE. CHRISTINE LENNON DIGS IN.

Heath Ceramics, the Sausalito, Calif., dinnerware and tile manufacturer, is such a good example of a modern-day company with a conscience (and a cult following) that it's easy to forget Heath has been at it, with very few changes to its methods, for more than 50 years. Throughout Northern California, devotees talk about the dinnerware as if the pieces were heirlooms — and certainly they're durable enough to span generations — while dozens of area restaurants serve their locally grown sunchokes on Heath plates. (There is even a Heath Chez Panisse collection.) And in the last few years, under energetic new ownership, Heath has not only expanded and updated its product lines but also begun to invite other, like-minded companies to its table, all of which are committed to making products in an environmentally sound, aesthetically glorious way.

"Primarily, we were looking for companies or individuals that make things because they love it and their business was generated from that," says Robin Petravic, who, along with his business partner and wife, Catherine Bailey, purchased the company in 2003 from its ailing 90-something founder, the ceramicist Edith Heath, who died two years later. Bailey, a product designer, and Petravic, a product development engineer, had no background in pottery when they bought Heath. But they knew enduring design when they saw it and recognized an opportunity to bring the brand back to its postwar heyday — but with a contemporary edge.

Heath's weighty ceramic tiles and hand-finished plates and cups are still designed, made and sold under the same roof, in a factory that was built in 1959. The company has a waste-not ethic that has been eco-friendly for decades, dating back to the days when green was just another color option. A product of the Depression, the ever-frugal Edith Heath sourced local clay from nearby Sacramento, developed a low-temperature firing technique



to cut fuel consumption and built a self-contained business (with its own machine shop to handle repairs) that still generates very little waste: all the clay scraps are reused, and defective products are sold at a discount at Heath's onsite factory store or recycled by mosaic artists. Though the original motives were economic, these practices match up to the modern model of conservation.

But as environmentally sound as Heath's products were, their presentation left something to be desired, as evidenced by the rather forlorn look of the factory store. "When we got here, the store was this really funky place that wasn't really designed for selling anything," Bailey says. "It was dusty. There were no prices except for a list on the wall. And there was no one to sell to the customers." To liven things up, Bailey and Petravic pulled the cups and plates off the shelves to create full table displays — which led to Heath's partnerships with other companies.

"When you're putting together a store, there's merchandising to think of," she says. "We thought, You need flatware and glassware to eat, so let's put that in the store, too. But we didn't want to sell anything that didn't mesh

with our beliefs. At first, we looked for lines made in the U.S. that were respectful of manufacturing, craft and great design. Then we had to go a little wider to find products that fit those criteria."

Those include stainless-steel flatware by David Mellor, the celebrated British designer and retailer. (The colorful handles of Mellor's children's flatware inspired Heath to create a line of children's plates and cups in red, yellow and blue.) There are also Green Glass tumblers, made from recycled wine bottles in Weston, Wis., and mouth-blown stemware and decanters from Holmegaard, a Danish manufacturer that was founded by a widowed mother of seven in the 1820s. Handcrafted Creative Candles, solid maple cutting boards by Edward Wohl, table linens by Native Organic and hand-printed tea towels from the South African company

Skinny LaMinx are among the other lines that Heath now sells.

This winter, Heath is expanding south to Los Angeles, where it will team up with Atwater Pottery's founder, Adam Silverman, to open a retail and studio space in West Hollywood. According to Silverman, a respected studio potter and (sorry, Adam) part of the local hipster establishment, the plan is to invite ceramics artists to a sort of residency program where they will work with him, experimenting with glazes and prototypes for new designs to be considered for production by Heath. The studio will also reach out to the thriving local design community and businesses like restaurants, offering its services for custom projects that might be too big for Silverman to take on alone or too small for Heath to make in its main factory.

"What they make now won't change," Silverman says. "It's just good design. It doesn't date, and it works in so many different environments. But there's some really obvious room for growth, like making vases or garden planters or ceramic lighting. We're hoping there will be a lot of activity here in terms of making, designing, thinking and doing." ■