

Birmingham

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HOME & GARDEN

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"If a chef wants one piece, he wants another one right away," says Payne. "We make sets, but they don't match exactly. Every one is different, which makes it easier to replace broken pieces." BOTTOM: Pottery is a "artistic expression," says Tena Payne, who began learning the art as a high school student. "You can never say you've done it all. We have no idea how the Chinese made some of the pieces that they did."



free-form meets function

Potters market culinary creations to top chefs

by Donna Cornelius • photography by Sylvia Martin

The potter's wheel has taken an unexpected turn for Tena Payne and Judy Barber. Once just a basement hobby, the duo's work has become a hot commodity among the country's top restaurateurs.

"I got hooked on pottery while I was a student at Homewood High School," says Payne. "But while I was raising a family, I worked at my pottery intermittently. I did art shows and worked at home."

Along the way, Payne managed to mold a solid reputation as a potter. But it was her job at a local radio station that led

to the chance to make a living at the craft she loves. There she met Judy Barber, a fellow potter who was reluctantly smiling in the marketing and advertising fields.

Like Payne, Barber, who studied pottery in college and spent a year in Japan studying with a master potter, was eager to pursue her artistic interests. The two joined forces with Earthborn Studios, which opened last August in the Leeds area.

"We both wanted to figure out how to work for ourselves, doing something we love to do," says Payne.

Earthborn Studios specializes in creating



artists profile •

tabletop products for upscale restaurants. The idea came when Payne was commissioned to create an exclusive line of pottery for Birmingham's Hot & Hot Fish Club.

Payne and Barber knew they'd found a lucrative market. In April 2003, they took their wares to the American Culinary Federation's trade show, where their products were a hit. Now, their pottery is proving popular with elite chefs, particularly those in the Northwest and on the West Coast.

A real coup was designing and producing dinnerware for Senai, a new restaurant at the famed Bellagio resort in Las Vegas.



Earthborn Studios

doesn't have a retail section on site, but you can find their products locally at the following locations:

THE COOK STORE

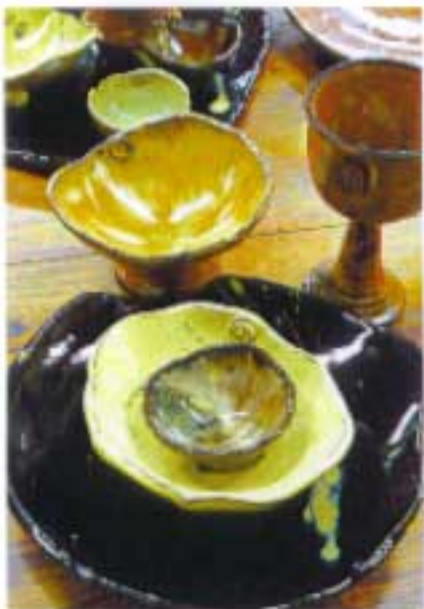
2041 Canaba Road
Mountain Brook Village
878 5277

WRAPSODY

100 Main Street
Patten Creek Shopping Center
Hoover
909 7277

ARTISTS INCORPORATED

3315 Morgan Drive
Ventura Hills
970 8893



FACING PAGE: Glazes for Payne's pottery are mixed using earth chemicals, such as feldspar, dolomite and silica. She tests different combinations to come up with the right formula, which affects the color and whether it will be transparent or opaque. **THIS PAGE, ABOVE:** Earthborn products are sturdy enough to withstand the rigors of restaurant use without sacrificing style. Payne often adds flair to her creations with tiny, stylized imprints, like those accenting some of the pieces here. She once made a leaf motif from a fossil.

Earthborn Pottery will be the primary tabletop presentation there. Executive chef Martin Heierling is so pleased with their work, says Payne, that he hired a Greek artist to design glassware specifically to complement their pottery.

Earthborn's creations are free-form pottery — with their earth-tone glazes and flowing shapes, they're a delight to the eye, as well as to the touch. But Payne and Barber say their products must be practical as well.

"For restaurant use, you have to make sure they're sturdy, dishwasher-safe and meet food safety requirements," says Barber. Payne spent many hours working on a clay base that would stand up to rigorous use.

When asked about the popularity of their pottery, Barber replies, "I think there's an appreciation for the natural, for what's created by hand ... People like things that are tactile and sensual." ●