

# matter

## PRODUCTION PRACTICES

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### Nourishing the Body & the Soul



Cover photo and inset courtesy of Earthborn Studios, Inc., Leeds, Ala.  
Cover design and photography by Ted Tucker.



Nourishing the

# Body

& the Soul

The women of Earthborn Studios are breathing life into art by creating inspiring functional pottery for high-end chefs and other upscale hospitality settings.

by **Christine L. Grahl**, Editor

**H**ow can you make a living doing what you love? It's a question that plagues many people, but particularly artists and potters. Even with representation at galleries and art shows, making ends meet is often tricky. And for those potters who have been fortunate enough to branch out into the wholesale market, another challenge awaits—how can you price each piece to be competitive with other ceramic products while still making a profit?

For years, Tena Payne struggled with these questions. In the '70s and '80s, while juggling a career as a mother and a corporate advertising executive, Tena became a renowned Raku artist, perfecting her craft on evenings and weekends. She sold her work as Earthborn Pottery, a name she had selected while still in high school to evoke the origins of her art. Many of her pieces were commissioned for corporate collections such as Southern Progress Corp., part of a permanent collection of

Alabama crafts displayed at Alabama Welcome Centers and sold through galleries in Birmingham, Dallas, Ft. Worth, Santa Fe, Minneapolis, Destin, Fort Walton and other venues throughout the South. She participated in a number of juried art shows and was recognized with numerous awards. By the late '90s, Tena knew she was ready to move to the next level.

"I've always wanted to make interactive pottery, but I knew my work needed to have a good price point so that I could



A collection of Earthborn pottery.

survive. Raku is typically priced as art, while a lot of functional pottery is priced as plasticware. I didn't want to compromise; I knew I had to find the right market if I were going to be successful," she explains.

### A Hot & Hot Deal

Tena began experimenting with different clay bodies and glazes as she tried to find the perfect fit for her functional ware. In the meantime, she also took up another hobby—growing shitake mushrooms.

"I couldn't support my habit at the grocery store, so I had to grow my own," she laughs.

But Tena got more than she bargained for. With the first flush of mushrooms, she was harvesting nearly 60 lbs per week. Rather than letting them spoil, she decided to try selling the extra mushrooms to a nearby restaurant, the Hot & Hot Fish Club in Birmingham, Ala., owned by the nationally renowned chef Chris Hastings. As it turned out, fine food wasn't the only thing on the restaurant's menu; Hastings also had an eye for fine art and pottery.

"I had no idea who Chris Hastings was or what kind of restaurant he had; it must have been angels showing me the way. He bought my mushrooms, and while I was waiting for him to write me a check I looked around and saw some pieces of pottery in his restaurant. I told him I was a potter, and that was the beginning of a great relationship," Tena explains.

Chris and Tena immediately began collaborating on a line of pottery that would be exclusive to the Hot & Hot Fish Club. For Hastings, whose restaurant is characterized by a variety of functional art from local and internationally known artists—including a harvest table and matching hutch crafted by musician Robert Moore, a chandelier and some iron and wood chairs designed by blacksmith John Ledford, and a front awning and menu marquis crafted by sculptor Bob Lehman—Tena's distinctive pottery was the perfect addition to his collection.

For Tena, the collaboration with Hastings was the big break she had been seeking.



The women artists of Earthborn Studios. From left: Brenda Long, Cathy Catalano, Molly Smith and Tena Payne.

"I knew that to grow my functional pottery business, I needed more exposure to a greater number of potential customers. The restaurant venue seemed perfect, because a different group of people every night would be seeing and interacting with my art, rather than just looking at it on a gallery podium or seeing it once a year at an art show," Tena says. "Chris gave me a tremendous opportunity, and his vision and inspiration were instrumental to the success of my business."

### Expanding the Family

With one exclusive commission under her belt and a new marketing strategy, Tena

# Words to Live By

"One of the major motivators in my life has been my father," says Tena. "Daddy was a truck driver and didn't have a formal education, but he's one of the most brilliant people I ever knew. I remember him saying on numerous occasions, 'That man over there can do it, and I'm just as smart as he is. I can do it too.' It's the whole idea that if you think you can do something, you can. You just have to believe you can do it, and then take everything one step at a time. You cannot be afraid to fail, and you should not be upset when there is a failure. Each failure is a learning experience. In my mind, the only time you truly fail is when you quit."



Payne



The pottery created by Earthborn Studios is tailored to the functional and aesthetic needs of the intended setting. Left: "Buttons" add a distinctive design element to bowls. Below: One of 11 different forms commissioned by Chef Martin Heierling for Sensi, the newest upscale restaurant in the Bellagio's Spa Tower.



set her sights on finding additional opportunities in the restaurant and hospitality field. She began attending food-related exhibitions, such as the American Culinary Federation's annual trade show, and actively networking to get her name and artistic abilities in front of other high-end chefs. But she also recognized she couldn't grow her business alone. In 2003, Tena hired Judith Suzann Barber, a former marketing director for International Expeditions. After receiving her bachelor of fine arts degree with a concentration in ceramics, Judith studied in Takamatsu, Japan, for one year with Master Potter Kita-Sensei. Combined with Tena's extensive background in corporate advertising and management, as well as her reputation in pottery, the two women made an

impressive team. Earthborn Studios, Inc. was born.

"We knew that the company's mainstay would continue to be pottery, but we both love glass and other media. When the company was incorporated, we chose the name 'Studios' to encompass other products we might develop down the road," Tena explains.

According to Tena, the women experienced a wonderful collaboration from the very beginning. "Judy's been the extra pair of hands that I needed. But the fact that both of us came from a marketing background has also been extremely valuable. For years I sat at my desk thinking, 'I wish

I was at home making my pots.' But all of the experiences I gained from working with a major publication, working as a corporate recruiter or writing ad campaigns—these elements all came together to allow me to think in a marketing sense rather than a potter's sense," Tena says.

As the business began to grow, Earthborn Studios hired several other artists to help fill the increasing number of orders. It just so happened that all of these artists have been women. Although Tena insists

this wasn't a purposeful move on her part, she also believes it hasn't been entirely accidental. As with the mushrooms, labeling the circumstances as a mere coincidence seems a bit simplistic. But as Judy points out, the work at Earthborn Studios requires "a certain sensitivity, intuition and perfectionism" that these women all bring to the table.

As Tena talks about "her girls"—there are five now, including Tena and Judy—it becomes clear that they aren't so much employers and employees as they are an extended family, with everyone working together toward a common goal.

"We all love what we do, and we have so much fun," Tena explains. "We have a beautiful dance going on right now. We all started out doing everything in the studio. For instance, when we were glazing, everybody would come together to glaze, and the same thing for firing. So everybody knows every aspect of the production cycle. Now everyone has her own separate role, but we all understand how our work ties into one another. We all get along and know what each other needs to do her best work."

### Strategies for Success

Over the past two years, Earthborn Studios has grown rapidly. In addition to the Hot & Hot Fish Club, Earthborn pottery is now featured in a number of other upscale restaurants, resorts, lodges and country clubs, including Covenant Cove's Bistro La Luna in Guntersville, Ala.; Arman's of Mountain Brook, Ala.; Cafe Del La Mare-Fairhope, Ala.; IZ Café, Birmingham, Ala.; and Isla's Kitchen, an upscale Mexican restaurant in Treasure Island Resort & Casino in Las Vegas, Nev. In December 2004, two new lines of exclusive pottery were placed into service at the Bellagio Resort in Las Vegas—one comprising large serveware (including platters, bowls and other vessels) for the Bellagio's 50,000-square-foot banquet hall, and the other commissioned by Chef Martin Heierling for Sensi, the newest upscale restaurant in the Bellagio's recently constructed Spa Tower.



Rims are compressed and rolled to provide a more chip-resistant edge.

According to Judith, collaborating with chefs and hospitality designers is both inspiring and rewarding, but it's not for everyone. "Chefs love having the opportunity to have the creative latitude that they have with a potter, and it's become somewhat of a trend for high-end chefs to be able to commission an artist to do their tabletop. But it's rare for them to find someone who can do it well. Pottery that's used in restaurants and other hospitality settings has to be sturdy and durable, and it has to meet all of the standards for food safety. We haven't met many other potters who are willing to go through the due diligence required to make sure their pottery can be used in that environment," she says.

Rather than tackle the testing themselves, Earthborn Studios partnered with a large tabletop manufacturer in England to carefully evaluate characteristics such as glaze fit, thermal shock resistance, chip resistance, body vitrification and food safety. The artists also continued to improve their clay body—primarily a red cone 8 body that enhances Earthborn's rich glazes and also hides small chips that might occur through regular use—to ensure that the pieces would withstand industrial dish-

washers, microwaves and ovens (if placed in a cool oven and brought to temperature). Their efforts have paid off through continued new orders.

In addition to having a beautiful, durable, food-safe product, one other element has played into Earthborn Studio's favor. As a certified member of the Women's Business Enterprise National Council (WEBNC), Earthborn has an advantage when bidding on some projects to larger corporations. "There are tax incentives for purchasing from diverse groups, such as women-owned businesses," explains Tena. "Being certified as a women-owned business makes it easier for companies to decide to buy from us."

For many chefs and designers, however, Earthborn's WEBNC status is undoubtedly just an added perk, if it's even a consideration. The beauty and timelessness of Earthborn's pottery, combined with the artists' customized approach, lends a highly desirable aspect to this age-old craft. Each commissioned line is a unique blend of wheel-thrown and freeform designs, carefully fashioned to satisfy both functional and aesthetic

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demands. Although the work is challenging, it's also fulfilling.

"We're producing around 1000 pieces per month, and it's difficult to produce the volume that we need to fill some orders," admits Tena. "We've had to develop systems and go through trial and error to find out what works and what doesn't, and what pieces are easier to produce than other pieces, culling the line so that it still has a unique look but isn't quite so time-consuming. But we don't ever want to lose this look. It might always cost more, but we believe it's worth it."

Of course, some concessions will undoubtedly have to be made along the way as the company continues to grow. For example, to help increase the volume of pieces moving through the studio, Earthborn Studios recently purchased a used 40-ton hydraulic press from Mohr Corp., Brighton, Mich. But Tena insists that even this is just a "helping hand."

"It's just a piece of machinery that can give us more muscle. When the clay comes off the press, we will still alter it by hand to ensure that each piece is unique. We're planning the pieces so that pressing is only one part of the forming process; each piece will go through other stages before it's finished," Tena says.

### Bringing Art to Life

Part of Earthborn Studios' mission is a belief that art can enter any arena of life and be intimately enjoyed. To that end, the company embraces the versatility of its products. "Our pottery is ideally suited to restaurant tabletops, but it works equally well in a gallery or in a residential setting," says Tena. "Part of our strategy is to have Earthborn pottery in a major exclusive restaurant, a supportive retail center and a major art show all in the same city, so that we have market penetration on different levels."

Tena also hopes to establish exclusive wholesale accounts with caterers, who would rent the work out for upscale dinner parties and events. But ultimately, for Tena and the other artists at Earthborn

## Giving Back

When Tena was in high school, the chair of the art department at Samford University, Lowell Vann, Ph.D., visited her class and demonstrated throwing on a potter's wheel. For Tena, it was a life-changing event.

"I was one of those kids who had a bunch of extra energy and didn't know where to put it. When I saw the clay moving in his hands, I was hooked," she says.

As she became first a successful artist, then a production potter, Tena has invested a significant amount of time and energy into making sure that other young people have the same opportuni-

ty to experience the pleasure of creating an object. In 1990-91, as president of Alabama Designer/Craftsmen (AD/C, Alabama's largest non-profit craft organization), she designed and implemented the launch of the Community Outreach Program, in which artists are paid by AD/C to go into school systems and demonstrate their craft. She also served as AD/C president in 1991-92, 1993-94, and 2001-02, and has held positions as standards chair, art show and sale chair, gallery show coordinator, newsletter editor, workshop chair and grant writer for the organization over the years. In February 2003, Tena coordinated the 18th Annual Alabama Clay Conference, which drew together 325 participants in Hoover, Ala., to interact in various aspects of clay and production methods. And she continues to look for other ways to serve.

"I've had so much pleasure in this work—I want to give as much as possible back to the community," she says.

**Part of Earthborn Studios' mission is a belief that art can enter any arena of life and be intimately enjoyed.**

Studios, the work is all about sharing their dreams and inspiration with others.

"The Earthborn Studios artists are also all 'foodies' and enjoy the commonalities shared with the chefs for whom we design," notes Judith. "Raw material is taken from the earth to be carefully formed

and formulated, subjected to the right time and temperature for baking, then placed on the table to be enjoyed. Mixers, baker's racks, oven mitts, rolling pins and measuring cups are tools of a potter as well as a chef.

"As in the high culinary arts, the art of clay is expressive but exacting. We follow traditions that have been passed down by potters for centuries. For the most part, the processes we use are pre-Industrial Revolution, requiring artists' eyes and strong hands. Earthborn Studios is a small band of artists who are living a dream and bringing it to life in pottery to inspire and nourish the lives of others." ☺

**Editor's note:** All photos in this article are by Ted Tucker ([www.tedtucker.com](http://www.tedtucker.com)).

For more information about Earthborn Studios, including links to Hot & Hot Fish Club and the Bellagio Las Vegas, contact the company at 5520 Rex Ridge Rd., Leeds, AL 35094; (205) 956-5849; fax (205) 956-6671; e-mail [earthbornpottery@yahoo.com](mailto:earthbornpottery@yahoo.com); or visit [www.earthbornpottery.net](http://www.earthbornpottery.net).