

Earth Alchemist

Tena Payne makes magic with her potter's wheel.



It's every potter's dream—to turn common clay into something extraordinary. At Earthborn Pottery in Leeds, Tena Payne does just that. Her striking ceramics seem both earthy and exotic, like artifacts of a lost civilization. While standard tableware strives for symmetry and uniformity, Tena's celebrates the alchemy of the kiln—the unpredictable way pigment and

clay flux and fuse. No two of her pieces are exactly alike. Their unique allure fuels sales of Earthborn Pottery to high-end restaurants and retailers in Alabama and across the country.

Tena began working with clay as a student at Homewood High School. "I was one of those troubled teens, not quite fitting in," Tena recalls. "The minute I saw clay spinning on

a potter's wheel, I was hooked." As an adult, she drifted away from clay, writing radio ads and working for *Southern Living* magazine's garden department. In 1995 she showed up at a Birmingham restaurant, Hot and Hot Fish Club, peddling a different kind of earth-born product. "My husband, Wynn, and I were growing shiitake mushrooms and getting so

TEXT BY JEFF BOOK | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROB CULPEPPER AND TED TUCKER

get to know

many we started selling them to chefs," she says. Chatting with Hot and Hot's Chris Hastings, she learned he was looking for handcrafted dishes to complement his Southern-bred cuisine. That was all Tena needed to set the wheel spinning again.

"Chris gave me basic requirements but left the form to me," Tena says. "I had no interest in doing round, redundant dishes. I wanted to make pieces as distinctive as the food. It's taken years of trial and error to find the right clay and glazes." Dolomite, feldspar, and other minerals yield the lustrous hues of Earthborn's 20-plus proprietary glazes, with names such as Forest, Calypso Blue, and River Rock—a nod to the whitewater paddling she and Wynn enjoy. One happy accident: The signature "buttons" on many Earthborn products, cast from ammonites and other fossils, began as a way to cover up cracks.

Along with her artistic vision and hard work, Tena's flair for marketing helped the business grow. Early on, at a New Orleans culinary show, dishes she lent to chefs for cooking demonstrations were spotted by a sales representative. That led to a big order for a restaurant at the Bellagio in Las Vegas. "I was still working out of my basement!" she says. "We had to scramble to get everything done in time." Their wares had to pass laboratory tests to prove they could stand up to commercial use. "We fire our pieces at 2,400 degrees," Tena says. "Restaurants tell us they're more likely to be stolen than to break."

Earthborn Pottery shares its home—a former watch factory in Leeds, next to Laney's Country Cooking—with Cahaba Clayworks, a teaching studio/gallery she founded with ceramic artist Larry Allen. There is room to expand as Tena continues to add products. Developed for Bromberg's Jewelry, her new Botanical line of plates preserves impressions of clover, asparagus stalks,



"I'm being paid to do something I love," says Tena about her work. She sells pottery from Earthborn's front room, with seconds (at a relative bargain) available in the back. Studio designs are each created individually by hand and are featured in galleries across the nation. Earthborn also offers custom designs and will create new glazes for clients. Tena and partner Larry Allen's Cahaba Clayworks offers classes from two hours to six weeks in length. For more info, call 205.702.7055 or visit www.earthbornpottery.net.



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and other flora. Imprinted with university seals, ceramics sanctioned by Auburn and Alabama come not in school colors but in Tena's muted glazes.

Earthborn tableware is now used in various MGM casinos (both restaurants and shops), Sushi Samba in Miami, Charlie Palmer in Dallas, Tangerine in Philadelphia, and other outposts of fine dining. In Alabama, they enhance meals at Hot and Hot and another Chris Hastings venture, SpringHouse on Lake Martin, as well as at Ross Bridge Resort in Birmingham. Tena finds it easy to work with chefs, saying: "Like me, they take materials out of the ground, rearrange them, then put them through fire to give pleasure to people."



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