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ART IN DESIGN



HEATH CERAMICS
 FORWARD THINKING

TEXT: STACIE STUKIN



Aya Brackett



Catherine Bailey and Robin Petravac share a charming 1896 Victorian home in Sausalito near the San Francisco bay with their son, Jasper. The couple, who acquired the iconic Heath Ceramics brand in 2003, embellished the space in a symphony of blues that showcase Heath tiles in a variety of shapes and sizes—hexagons, rectangles and diamonds cover surfaces indoors and out, demonstrating that the midcentury brand founded by Edith Heath is still as timeless and relevant as it was when she opened the company with her husband in 1948.

Ushering a legacy brand forward is always a delicate balance between preservation and progress but, Bailey says, “We always feel like Edith is here with us. The way she worked with glazes, her designs, her kilns—they are the foundation of who we are. We have an amazing archive of her work and we like to look back to move forward. It feels natural to do that.”

Like Edith and her husband, Brian, before them, Catherine and Robin work together. They shuttle between the original factory in Sausalito, which opened in 1959, and the 60,000 square foot facility they created in San Francisco’s Mission District in 2012 to accommodate the manufacture of their growing tile business. Opening a manufacturing facility that relies on the touch of the hand in the heart of San Francisco where tech-heavy businesses rule might seem counterintuitive, but the factory is the heart of the building, and it’s open to the public for tours. “We do things differently here, so we wanted

to help people understand the value of what do and let the community see how we work,” Bailey says.

In addition to the factory, the building houses a newsstand, a Heath showroom, a gallery and Tartine Manufactory, a restaurant and bakery where, like Heath’s factory, the integrity of a hand-finished product infused with care is crucial to the finished product. Subsequently, Heath has become a hub for creative gatherings like book signings and art exhibitions. Says Petravac, “We didn’t want it to be just a shopping destination. We wanted to build a community space that hosts all kinds of interesting stuff that we wanted to attend ourselves.”

This holistic business strategy, where design and sales go hand in hand with community building, has also created meaningful opportunities for collaboration. Their Chez Panisse line with acclaimed chef Alice Waters launched in 2007 has become a classic part of the tabletop collection; later this year they will introduce new glazes. Last year, Heath teamed up with iconic Finnish brand Artek—a kindred spirit in its decades-long dedication to handmade, functional, simple designs. Tung Chiang, Heath’s Clay Studio Director, headed up the project and the result is a limited edition collection of the classic Aino and Alvar Aalto-designed bent-wood tea trolleys inlaid with tiles inspired by experimental glazes found in Heath’s extensive glaze recipe library, which is still under the auspices of Edith’s niece Winifred Crittenden, who is the company’s master glazer.

Renee Zellweger





Renee Zellweger



Mariko Reed





Ava Brackett



Jeffrey Cross

Chiang's design studio in the San Francisco factory is a whimsical space where all colors of glaze and shapes of clay-forms are illuminated with natural light from the industrial windows. He admits the studio is a luxury, a place where he and his team can create without the pressure to sell. "The beauty is that in the clay studio we have the space to dream, be playful and at the same time pursue the goal of understanding how to design better and carry on the tradition of the craft."

While making well-designed products with intention is always the focus at Heath ultimately, it's a manufacturing business. To that end, Bailey and Petravac have put lots of thought and resources toward pursuing sustainability goals. Edith Heath already laid that foundation when in 1947 she created a proprietary clay body that requires only one lower-temperature firing, as opposed to the more typical two firings at higher heat, which uses more gas. "These values were really important to Edith," Bailey says. "She always tried to conserve resources, but she also believed that if you made good quality products, they would be less disposable and last forever."

Bailey and Petravac have kept that in mind as they focus on becoming a zero-waste company. These initiatives include a

graywater system that recycles all the water used in the factory for reuse in glazing and cleanup. They've also introduced a recycled clay body made from scrap that's used to make the sculptural relief tiles for their Stan Bitters collection. And when it comes to packaging, they don't require it—product goes from factory to showroom in reusable totes. When shipping is required, they use recyclable, 100 percent post-industrial waste packing. "The only plastic on our shipping package is the UPS label," says Petravac.

For Petravac and Bailey, sustainability is also about people, communities and preserving the values of a business that's been around for 70 years. As the couple began thinking about a succession plan, they also wanted to honor the work and loyalty of their more than 200 employees. If they ever sold the company, there were no guarantees things would stay the same. So earlier this year, they opted to establish an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP), where company profits are put into the ESOP as a retirement benefit. "For us, this felt right for the culture we're trying to create at Heath and we also felt this was a way to run a business to make it last," Petravac says. "We don't believe businesses exist just to make money. We believe businesses can provide a cultural value, a cultural richness while also contributing to society." ■ *Heath Ceramics, heathceramics.com*