

## The First Year

### Selecting Tabletop Smallwares for the Shop

Not all china is created equal. Read on ...

by Kent Holloway



As the build out of your espresso bar proceeds, it will occur to you that you need to start thinking about "for-here" mugs, cups, and dishes (as opposed to disposable "to-go" containers). This may consist of china, glassware, and silver. China is the generic industry name for all ceramic-based plates, mugs, and serving articles. Glassware, on the other hand, includes mugs, stemware, tumblers, dinnerware, and bowls, all made, of course, with glass. Silver is the stainless steel table utensils used for eating, just like at home. The amount of tabletop smallwares (combination of china, glassware, and silver) you carry, if any, is driven by four things: 1. The menu selection you plan to offer. 2. The number of tables you have for your customers (at least five or more). 3. Whether or not you install a dishwasher. If you decide to develop a tabletop program and you haven't built out your bar yet, I strongly urge you to add a commercial under-the-counter dishwasher (see SCR December 1996 issue). 4. Your concept. For some concepts, it's not appropriate to invest the extra money to add this level of service.

#### Why and How I Select China

Before I opened my first Austin Chase espresso bar, I was extremely concerned that only a small percentage of my target market knew what espresso-based drinks were. Sure, Starbucks had a few stores, Seattle's Best had been around for a while and Millstone was popular in the local grocery stores, but this was still the dark ages of specialty coffee.

I believed in over-compensation. The idea being that by offering a classy tabletop service, we would create a nice ambiance and a significant difference between us and our competition. A simple, all-white china pattern for those who wanted to eat their cinnamon rolls in the shop, an elegant glass stemware selection for Italian sodas and fruit juices, and a nice heavy fork and knife for pastries (my wife says I'm really picky about silver, but everyone agrees that a fork has to have weight and a "smooth-mouth feel," don't they?)

I did a lot of focus group testing (when you bring together a group of individuals you hope will become your "regulars"--A.K.A. your "target market"--and show them about 37 different options to help you decide which patterns to use). You then must try to make

sense of their opinions. Hint: a lot of the color "designer" prints you like for the mugs and plates end up being white by default and sometimes you end up bagging the whole process and going with the designs you liked best in the first place. However, I still highly recommend the process to keep you from designing "a really cool place for people who only think and act like you." I'm sorry, but that will be a very small club. The key to success is to develop a table top design that is a unique reflection of you or your concept, and the tastes of your target market.

## China Basics

The use of pottery in cooking and food service is thousands of years old. The technology has surprisingly changed very little. Clay, which is a natural substance found in the soil, was first, and still is, formed into a vessel for cooking, eating or storage, and hardened by fire. Even the process of covering the pot with decorations and glazes made of silica (sand) dates back to the periods before the Greeks.

The first thing you must understand about china is that not all mugs and plates are created equal. There are important differences in the quality and longevity of china. The generally accepted categories of dinnerware and hollowware (mugs) that you have to choose from in the United States are as follows: (from least acceptable to most)

1. Pottery - what you made on the potter's wheel in high school. Great for the art show, but totally unfit for commercial use.
2. Earthenware or Crockery - cheap and easily chipped, scratched or broken. It may be colorful and inexpensive initially, but won't last through your first month.
3. Stoneware - better, but still lacking in the thermal breakdown strength, color, and longevity of restaurant china.
4. Ironstone china - this is a historic name for high-quality English stoneware. These are the high-end lines, including Denby, Dudson, and Villeroy & Boch, that you find at upscale department stores. They might look great in your espresso bar, but they are primarily designed for residential use and are outrageously expensive.
5. Fine china - this includes bone, frit or Belleek, and feldspar china. These are the most beautiful chinas available in the world, however, they are even less practical as a choice for the espresso bar (maybe a possibility for a tearoom) than English stoneware. Here's a cool trick you can do with the bone china. Hold your grandmother's plate up to the light and put your hand behind it. You should be able to see your hand through the plate. (Hint: don't try this during Thanksgiving dinner like I did.)
6. Restaurant China (also called commercial, institutional, or American Vitriified china) - this is the traditional china designed specifically for the American commercial market. In his article titled, "Dinnerware Manufacture and Use in the United States," (and you thought my titles were boring), Robert J. Beals of the Hall China Co. best describes it by writing:

"This china is a uniquely American blending of fine china and porcelain designed and engineered specifically for use in commercial restaurant operations. The body was formulated to give high-impact strength and durability, with the low absorption that is required for public food. Decorations are applied between the body and the glaze, or in the glaze, thereby protecting the decoration during commercial use.

"In the manufacturing processes of the United States, most of the ware is subjected to a high-temperature first firing and a lower-temperature second glaze firing. Some of the ware is manufactured as it is in the Orient, in one-fire operations wherein the body and the glaze mature in the same time and at the same temperature. Like fine china, American restaurant is vitrified, that is, it has a water absorption of less than five percent."

I estimate that currently 60 percent of the American espresso bars in the specialty coffee industry don't offer in-house china, 70 percent don't offer glassware, and 80 percent don't offer silver (including most Starbucks in all three categories). Yet, in Europe, 95 percent of the classic espresso bar/cafes use china, glassware, and silver. Thus, if you want to create a destination "sit-down" espresso bar that has a unique, timeless ambiance, you should consider developing a tabletop program.

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**Please Note:** Some pictures or diagrams are only available through the printed media.

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