

## Selecting Tabletop Smallwares, Part II



Before you buy low-budget china for your customers, consider the consequences and weigh them wisely.

by Kent Holloway

Coffee, tea and espresso-based drinks just taste better in china cups, and the use of china is a great way to add a designer's touch to an espresso bar's ambiance. But most first-time retailers don't know very much about the china industry. The three biggest U.S. companies specializing in commercial or restaurant china are Homer Laughlin, Buffalo China (subsidiary of Oneida) and Syracuse (subsidiary of Libby). You may recognize Homer Laughlin under the name Fiesta or Fiesta ware. These brightly colored, inexpensive dishes were introduced during the Depression and are still one of the most avidly collected chinas today. Although you can find them in almost every antique store in America, most people don't realize they are still produced.

### Concern Over Lead in the Glaze

Many retailers purchase china for their first store almost as an after thought, "Well, I've bought all of the really important equipment, I better go out and buy some cheap plates from one of the discount houseware chains or import stores." This same new coffeehouse owner will probably have to replace many of his plates due to chipping and may be creating a risk for his customers with potentially high levels of lead in the glaze. In his article on china, titled "Dinnerware Manufacture and Use in the United States," Robert J. Beals of the Hall China Co. writes:

"It has long been the practice to use lead-containing compounds in dinnerware glazes. The presence of these compounds gives a brilliant, hard, durable glaze when properly fired on the dinnerware. However, if the glaze is not properly matured, there can be problems with solubility of lead in the glaze in food acids. The first reported instance of food poisoning occurred in the United States in 1960. To prevent repetition of such an occurrence, agencies in the United States and in other parts of the world began research to identify and control lead and cadmium release from ceramic foodware...

The U.S. manufacturers of dinnerware, and most of the developed countries of the world, have subscribed to the World Health Organization and USFDA standards for heavy-metal release. Their quality control and evaluation of their fired glazes by independent laboratories assure the user of safe ware. However, some of the developing nations, including Mexico, The Peoples Republic of China, Taiwan and others, are negligent in their control of glazing and firing, and the imported ware violates the USFDA limits [and] ... threatens the health of the using public."

## **The Voice of Experience**

One of the surest ways to avoid the risk of leaded imports is to buy your china from a commercial food service equipment sales company (listed in my Yellow Pages under "Restaurant Equipment & Supplies"). One such company in the Seattle/Tacoma, Washington area is Bargreen-Ellingson. Owner Rick Ellingson is a second-generation restaurant supply merchant with a story or a joke about every aspect of the food service industry and the perfect person to ask what to look for when you are choosing china.

When asked which china company he prefers, Ellingson says, "The company I am most comfortable selling is Homer Laughlin. You have to understand that when you are selling vitrified china to smallware buyers representing chain restaurants or business people that are second-, third- or even fourth-generation restaurateurs, they have very high expectations regarding the thermal and mechanical breakdown resistance of a [product] line. In my experience, Homer Laughlin get the edge for piece longevity, value, history and design."

## **Thermal and Mechanical Breakdowns**

In this industry, china goes through a lot of abuse. It gets dropped, stacked, banged together and hit with eating utensils among other things. "Every hit sends a shock wave through the plate that you can't detect with the naked eye," says Ellingson. "Over time these impact shocks create what we call a 'mechanical breakdown' of the piece. The difference between excellent china and adequate commercial china is not so much the chip resistance of the plate or mug -- it's a given that we won't even consider a line that has a tendency to chip -- but rather, the length of time the piece can go through this process before it fails (cracks, scratches, breaks, or eventually chips). The other factor that ages china is what we call 'thermal breakdown.' This occurs as the piece is constantly heated and cooled. Every time the plate or mug goes through the high temp dishwasher, microwave or oven, it is heated to high temperatures and then cooled. This constant change in the molecular dynamics of the piece causes it to age and break down much faster than your typical stoneware used at home."

## **China Buyers Guide**

Consider the following check points to guide you through your first commercial-use china purchase:

1. Is the china manufactured by an established and respected company that intended its product to be used for commercial applications?
2. Is the china "American vitrified?" That is to say, that it is fired at 1320°C to 1330°C and manufactured with 10 percent to 20 percent alumina (for firing strength and shock resistance). Does it have a water absorption rate of less than 0.05 percent?

3. Does the piece have a glazed or finely hand-polished foot (the little ridge on the bottom of a plate)? If the foot is unpolished or poorly polished, the plate will scratch the one beneath it every time you stack.

4. Is the pattern you like available in a wide variety of plate sizes and mug styles? And more importantly, can you be sure that the pattern selected will be continued in the future?

5. The salesperson may use this as a big deal in the sales pitch, but don't be too concerned about whether or not a line is "single-fired," "double-fired" or even "triple-fired." There are both good and bad examples of china in each category.

6. When trying to decide how much of a given style you should buy for your shop, use the following as your guide: 1.5 plates and two mugs for each chair in the shop, give or take a few to meet a case size.

First-time buyers often need to be educated about the economics of the long-term value of their china purchase. "Our customers are concerned about the higher cost of purchasing high-quality [American vitrified] restaurant china from us, but they've found over the years that it's much more cost effective than replacing a 'cheap' piece at a ratio of three or four to one," says Ellingson. "I estimate that our fine lines of commercial china cost about 20 percent more than the china sold at the import stores [40 percent more if you want to create a custom design], but the buyer will get 300 percent more use out of the piece."

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

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