

The First Year

Testing China

Kent Holloway and his team of mini-scientists put china through the ultimate endurance test: the old-fashioned marble drop.

China is the generic industry name for all ceramic-based plates mugs and serving articles. Many espresso bar owners determine that china will enhance their customers' experience. They seek to develop a tabletop program that is a unique reflection of their personal taste, the theme of their concept, and the tastes of their target market (customers). China is an inexpensive way to help create a destination, sit-down espresso bar in the European tradition.



I was complaining to my friend Rick Ellingson (the restaurant equipment expert) that I couldn't believe how well the Homer Laughlin plates I bought had held up. And further, how the "import" store stoneware looked like an aerial photo of Pearl Harbor after bombing with all of the chips and cracks achieved in the same period of time.

Rick started in about "American Vitrified" china, firing temperatures, alumina levels, absorption rates, and "the finish of the foot" as if to say, "Kent, the only logical option for a home with young children or commercial application is restaurant china." I guess he's right. Have you ever asked your eight-year-old to do the dishes? Talk about mechanical breakdown!

(Not) Very Scientific Testing

I asked Rick what scientific methods were used to test china, apples for apples. He explained that the time-honored device still used to test commercial china in America and even at Stoke on Trent, England (the historical mecca of commercial china), is called a "plate tester," although some insiders call it a "chip tester." Nonetheless, it's the china industry's version of "Tool Time Tim Taylor-style" testing. Basically, you take a plate and screw it down to a board with a vise. A fulcrum arm with a steel weight on its end is raised and dropped against the plate again and again until the plate chips or breaks. The fulcrum arm has graduated marks on it so that the blow of the weight becomes more severe as the weight is moved up the arm. (This must have been adapted from some World War II interrogation device. I can just hear Rick testing plates, "Ve have vays to make you chip!") One manufacturer's line of plates is tested for potential customers against another's.

Don't laugh, but Rick tells me that the method for testing china mugs is to place a number of different manufacturers' mugs in a paper sack and shake the sack until the mugs break into hundreds of pieces. The mug that survives the most impact, wins. (With all of these scientific forms of release, I'm sure Rick will never need therapy.)

Rick's company, Bargreen-Ellingson, only has one testing unit to share between all of its equipment supply stores. So I decided to conduct my own (not very) scientific testing. I built a plate tester (my kids' tree house in the back yard), which included precisely designed weights (marbles from our Chinese checkers game), and called in a team of scientists (my eight-year-old son, Austin, and my three-year-old son, Colby). Just to be extra scientific, I checked the temperature as I headed outside (44 F and cloudy).

My team of scientists was enthusiastic about the project. **Austin:** "Dad, what are we going to do with all of these plates?" **Dad:** "Throw marbles at them." **Austin:** "Awesome." **Colby:** "Daddy, can I be a Power Ranger?" **Austin:** "Dad, does mom know we're using her plates for this?" **Dad:** "No son, this is top-secret testing!" **Austin:** "Awesome." **Colby:** "Daddy, I have to go to the baf-room ... daddy, I haf to go now!" **Dad:** "Alright, hold on Austin, I'll be right back, don't start without me. Colby, why are your boots on the wrong feet?"

Eventually, after calibrating our instruments (going to the bathroom, wiping runny noses and putting our boots on the right feet) we were ready to begin testing. I lined up the plates: one eight-inch inexpensive stoneware salad plate made in Japan; one eight-inch salad plate with the import store's name inscribed on the bottom; one seven-inch Buffalo (major U.S. commercial china company) salad plate; and one ten-inch dinner plate made by Homer Laughlin, also a leading U.S. china manufacturer.

Test Results

My testers were very thorough in their job. The testing area sounded like this: plink, plink, plink, thump, "ouch!", plink, plink, plink, thump, "ouch!" **Dad:** "Colby, don't hit daddy in the back of the head when he leans over to pick up the marbles."

The results were as follows: The inexpensive salad plate from Japan chipped with the first marble hit to the rim and broke into three perfect pie-shaped pieces with the next hit. The second plate, the one purchased at the import store, behaved exactly as it had when my bachelor friend "helped out" doing the dishes years ago. Each hit resulted in a chip or break. The third plate was from the original stock of Buffalo's "Espree" pattern, purchased for our espresso bar in 1990. It had already put in eight years of service and only suffered a small break after a long "D-Day-like" barrage of marble hits.

The Homer Laughlin plate had no chips and no breaks, however, when you turned the plate over, you could clearly see a spider web-patterned crack in the glaze at each point a marble struck the plate. It was an excellent example of mechanical breakdown. When I grabbed the plate on both ends and tried to bend it back and forth, it made a grinding noise, demonstrating that the interior body of the plate was destroyed while the ultra-

strong glaze made the plate virtually unbreakable. (I'm planning on using this plate for my brother-in-law next Thanksgiving. He can really load up on turkey.)

When the targets became the final two commercial chinas, my scientists found they had met their match. Marbles rained down like a Kansas hail storm. The testers went from dropping marbles with their arms out-stretched to their best Nolan Ryan imitation. They were determined to chip, break or at least crack the commercial china. Finally, I came out from my retreat, the big backyard tree (I could just imagine my boys thinking, "Hey, isn't this how David got Goliath?"), and called a truce on the plates' behalf. I was amazed at the abuse the commercial china plates were able to withstand in comparison to the stoneware china. A retail buyer for a famous chain of espresso bars told me recently that he once saw a "Denby" (a famous brand of English ironstone) salesperson throw a dinner plate against the side of a concrete building to demonstrate its durability. I guess china testing is pretty sophisticated the world over.

My scientific team had a lot of other great ideas that we weren't able to pursue **Austin:** "Hey dad, let's test mom's fine china." **Dad:** "Get serious!" **Austin:** "Well then let's get some more plates and shoot them with guns." **Dad:** "We don't have a gun." **Colby:** "Daddy, I haf a cowboy shooting gun. I really, really do. I got it for my birfday. Daddy, you can ebin use my ninja sword." **Dad:** "Thanks Colby, but I think we're done for now."

So much for scientific testing.

Kent Holloway is cofounder and former CEO of Austin Chase Coffee, Gig Harbor, Wash., a subsidiary of Caffè Appassionato. He lectures nationally for the Coffee Fest trade shows and provides consulting to companies starting specialty coffee operations.

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

Originally published - April 1998
Specialty Coffee Retailer.