

SIGNATURE DISHES

Now that we can dine together once more, the humble plate is heaped with new significance. Isabella Smith discovers the ceramic artists transforming our tableware





Previous page, Kattah: photo Josef Komczak | Uys: photo Sarah White

In the depths of lockdown, one of the many pleasures denied to us was sharing a meal with friends: the simple act of sitting together around a table, chewing the fat. Despite this, food became a vital way to brighten up our daily lives – and alongside the ubiquitous banana bread came a growing interest in the accoutrements of eating. Last year, ‘tablescaping’ – the art of laying an attractive table – became a surprise internet sensation, with Instagram influencers showing off their styling skills. Handmade tableware was a must. The humble dish took on new significance too, with food lovers and chefs buying and commissioning one-off pieces and artists re-examining the culture and politics of the plate.

‘It’s all gone a bit ballistic,’ says Corin Mellor, creative director of design brand David Mellor. ‘People who now had time on their hands wanted to know more about their food – and more about where a plate has come from, who made it and what makes it special. It’s resulted in this higher demand for craft.’ The most popular dishes stocked by the store are the Standard Ware range by the Leach Pottery – classic, everyday tableware glazed in an earth-toned palette – and a series of vivid blue-and-white pieces by Danish potter Lars P Soendergaard Gregersen. That Nigel Slater has declared ‘Hell is an electric blue plate’ puts the celebrity food

writer at odds with public taste: sales of handmade plates such as Gregersen’s are up by 25% over the last year. Potters have struggled to keep up with the demand. Plates require precious space in a firing, compared to the relatively low price they command. ‘Getting enough plates out of the potters can be tricky,’ says Mellor. ‘They often have practical problems like kilns breaking and glazes going wrong. No two craft plates are the same, but that’s part of what people are paying for.’ Roelof Uys, lead potter at the Leach Pottery in St Ives, agrees: ‘We don’t try to make them perfect: they’re made by different people, and the marks, throwing rings, impurities in the clay and variations in the glaze are all slightly different. That’s the beauty of handmade.’ The Leach Pottery’s online sales quadrupled up to 20,000 per month during lockdown; demand is still so high that they currently have 150 plates on back order. ‘I hope what we’re seeing is a long-term change of values,’ says Uys. ‘People now care more about where objects come from. They want to know if they’ve been made in the UK by people paid a decent wage.’

With restaurants being closed for most of 2020 and early 2021, it’s unsurprising that most of these rising sales have been to individuals – although this may soon change, now that the nation’s hospitality industry has reopened. As we speak, Mellor has just sold 90 plates by Italian



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Gérard / Hjørshøj: photos Jay Goldmark



maker Montefeltro Pottery to the luxury London restaurant Chiltern Firehouse, and the Leach Pottery is still creating custom pieces for clients such as the nearby Gurnard’s Head, a gastropub with rooms in Cornwall. Chefs have long been aware of the power of studio pottery to spice up a dish: Cranks, the vegetarian chain that rode the 1970s trend for wholesome living, was renowned for its rustic tableware in oatmeal tones. When a 1923 earthquake destroyed artist and restaurateur Kitaōji Rosanjin’s prized collection of Japanese tableware, he famously learned how to pot and eventually served every culinary creation on his own wares.

Today, handmade plates are often a prerequisite for foodie figureheads when shooting their dishes for cookbooks or social media – or, quite simply, for their own domestic dinners. ‘Over the years I seem to have amassed a collection that has gone way beyond the kitchen cupboards and there are now several shelves of them in the scullery,’ Nigel Slater once declared on Instagram, where he regularly shares his prized pieces. ‘I know and use each and every plate and bowl and continue to admire those who made them.’ He is a regular customer at Goldmark Gallery in Rutland, with

Previous spread: plates by Mawuena Kattah. Opposite: plates by Roelof Uys for Leach Pottery. Top left: Jean-Nicolas Gérard, and below, one of his dishes. Top right: bowl by Anne Mette Hjørshøj



Danish potter Anne Mette Hjortshøj being a particular favourite. Hjortshøj's colour palette mirrors the earthy hues of her home on the island of Bornholm, where she gathers wild clay for her wood-fired pots. Slater sees Hjortshøj's muted tones as the perfect complement to his offerings: 'Quiet food for a quiet pot.' In a recent exhibition catalogue, Slater wrote: 'The colours that work most comfortably with my food are those of rain-filled clouds, the rust of the raw clay, the ice blue of a Nordic sky on a winter's afternoon.' A 'snow-grey' surface sets off 'a sleepy cauliflower soup or a sage-green leek and potato stew', while a deep caramel glaze best suits a vegetable korma or a creamy curry.

Goldmark Gallery's other bestselling plates are rather more raucous: bright, painterly slipware by French potter Jean-Nicolas Gérard. 'Each is like a unique canvas,' says director Jay Goldmark, who cites Tom Kerridge as another top chef customer buying for his own table. 'You can see Jean-Nicolas' thumb prints in the clay. He's a free thrower, so they're very individual. There's a vitality in handmade ceramics – an energy that you just don't get from machine-made plates.'

Outside of domestic contexts, the plate is also taking centre stage at exhibitions, not least at the British Ceramics Biennial (11 September – 17 October), where artists are rethinking its significance. For the biennial's *Award* exhibition – featuring 10 nominated ceramic artists who have been tasked with making new work in competition for a £5,000 prize – Mawuena Kattah has created *The Meal*, a table setting for eight people featuring vivid, hand-built plates, vases and pitchers, a screen-printed tablecloth, eight painted portraits and wallpaper. She is also busy cooking up a collaboration with a chef, designed to activate *The Meal* through intimate dinners served during the biennial. 'I want people to come together, to have a meal and to share my work,' says Kattah, who works with art and design studio Intoart, which supports people with learning disabilities. 'My family are from Ghana, so I like tasty food and beautiful ceramics and fabrics full of different shapes and bright colours.' The south London-based artist took cues from Brixton Market for her colourful, community-focused installation. Her bold, graphic designs recall the African wax-cloth prints that have long been a source of inspiration, evident in works such as 2016's tile panel *Auntie, Mum and Me talking about my Fabric Collection* (recently acquired for the V&A East).

The biennial has also drawn on the local public's love for beautifully designed plates. Earlier this year it held plate-making workshops for 150 residents exploring the city's ceramic heritage. The result? *Stoke Makes Plates*, an exhibition of 250 pieces made by members of the community, commissioned artists and local ceramics manufacturers. Meanwhile, New York-based artist Jacqueline Bishop has delved deeper into the plate's past to expose its more troubling symbolism. She was born in Jamaica and lived there until her teens, often staying with her grandmother. 'Like most women on the island, she had a cabinet full of special china: dishes for Sunday dinner or Christmas meals,' she remembers. Bishop began considering the scenes painted or printed onto her grandmother's bone china, such as British monarchs,



Stoke Makes Plates: photo Jenny Harper | Kattah: photo courtesy IntoArt

coronations or views of royal palaces. 'These dishes were beautiful, but they promoted a narrative that was violent for us in the Caribbean – one of colonisation, slavery, domination. So I made my own instead, and on my plates I told the story that those earlier pieces had obscured.' The artist collaborated with ceramicist Emma Price to create 18 fine bone china plates, produced in Stoke by Duchess China.

Each plate features a gold lustre rim encircling scenes of slavery in the Caribbean. People in manacles and chains, rendered in the style of 18th- or 19th-century engravings, are set against the lush flora and fauna of the islands. There's a visual and thematic link with Stoke native Josiah Wedgwood's fine tableware and anti-slavery activities. Alongside creating his world-famous china, Wedgwood was an early advocate for racial equality – as seen in his iconic abolitionist medallion of 1787, emblazoned with the words

Am I Not a Man and a Brother? and explored in a new book by V&A director Tristram Hunt (see page 21). 'I drew from the darker sides of our history,' says Bishop, 'but I included hummingbirds, hibiscus and so on. I want my work to be just as beautiful as the dishes I saw growing up.'

The biennial will be more than just a feast for the eyes: in September, local people in Stoke will be invited to dine together using the dishes produced for *Stoke Makes Plates*, in what the biennial describes as 'a point of celebration for the city and its future'. It's a fitting finish to a festival that invokes the power of plates to start conversations – and even open minds. As we come together once more, these qualities will add extra flavour to our dining. britishceramicsbiennial.com. Join us on 20 September for our online talk 'Spinning plates: how ceramic artists are shaking up the dining table' – visit craftsmagazine.org

Opposite page, top to bottom: two plates by Jacqueline Bishop and Emma Price with scenes of slavery in the Caribbean; Mawuena Kattah, who created *The Meal*, a community-focused installation. Above: dishes from *Stoke Makes Plates*, made by local residents