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FOOD // RESTAURANTS

Bay Area ceramists are bringing beautiful new meaning to how food is served



Chinzalée Sonami, owner and ceramicist of Pala Ceramics, trims a piece in her Oakland studio.
Gabrielle Lurie / The Chronicle

By **Soleil Ho**

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Last fall, I bought my first fancy ceramic dishes. While waiting for a hoagie from [Flour + Water Pasta Shop](#) in the Mission, I wandered over to a pop-up shop by [MMclay](#), a local tableware business run by ceramist MaryMar Keenan. Stacks of shiny glazed plates and bowls with rough, scraped exteriors called to me. I bought the lowest-commitment items, a couple of \$28 ramekins, and left with my wallet much lighter for it.

I was new to this world, but having those ramekins in my life has made me a convert.

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Craft ceramics don't normally get much love in food writing — photographers and stylists think about them a lot; writers rarely say anything. That elides the fact that plates are a big part of what makes eating out so special. There is so much thought that goes into each one, even before a speck of food touches them.



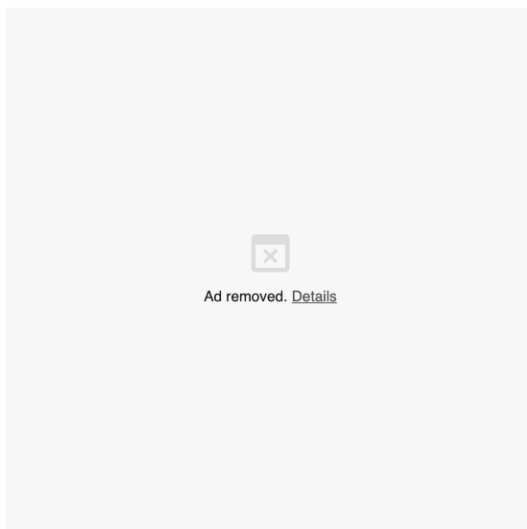
In the Bay Area, we have industry powerhouses like [Heath Ceramics](#) and a robust community of independent potters and ceramists. Handmade tumblers, bowls and custom mignardise platters alike adorn the tables of restaurants like Copita in Sausalito and Nightbird in San Francisco, doing the dual work of being both art objects and practical vessels. Three artisans in particular are doing exciting work in this field by collaborating directly with local bars and restaurants. These functional objects make big statements about the way we eat: In appearance and practice, they pass along each creator's sentiments about culture, inclusivity and art.



Chinzalée Sonami, owner and ceramist of Pala Ceramics, trims a piece in her Oakland studio. Gabrielle Lurie / The Chronicle

Chinzalée Sonami, the creator behind Oakland's [Pala Ceramics](#), makes some of the most eye-catching tableware I've seen: Her distinctive plaid patterns create bold contrasts that one rarely sees on American dinner tables, with soft, rounded edges that make tumblers, bowls and mugs look like tropical anemones.

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Usually, dishes are meant to accentuate the colors and textures of the food placed on them, and that often manifests as solid whites or beiges serving as the base, with

bolder colors and textures being used sparingly as accents. “But I have a philosophical beef with beiges, whites and neutral colors,” she told me.

It’s not that those colors themselves are unappealing per se, but she takes issue with the way they’re widely seen in the West as a default color for dishes — denoting sophistication, cleanliness and order. Her antidote to that is a style she calls “harmonious clashing,” inspired by Tibetan and French fashion and textiles like the traditional Tibetan bangdan apron, which features bright striped fabrics combined into a riotously colorful household garment. The goal, she said, is to juxtapose colors that might be surprising — or, to put it another way, that might ask more of the viewer than a simple beige vessel would.

To that end, she encourages customers to buy mismatched pieces from her shop, and says that figuring out which foods might look good on which plate is part of the fun. For example, her pale pink plates might highlight the bright red leaves of a radicchio salad, while slices of golden yellow cornbread would likely look stunning on orange and navy plaid plates. If you want to see Pala Ceramics’ products out in the wild, you can find them being used as mezcal cups at [Alkali Rye in Oakland](#).



Ceramic planters, mugs and plates line the wall at the studio of Chinzalée Sonami, the creator behind Pala Ceramics in Oakland. Gabrielle Lurie / The Chronicle

Another local ceramist, Lynn Chang, is challenging the assumptions of what people might consider to be a “proper” set of dinnerware with the products she makes for her 2-year-old company, [Uniqlay Ceramics](#). The seed of her business’ mission was planted when Chang, an immigrant from Taiwan, noticed that she never saw any chopsticks in photos by American ceramics brands, though “that’s how I eat 90% of my food,” she said. “In Taiwan, [every meal is family-style, even breakfast](#).”

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When she started out, she found herself being commissioned by customers to make pieces for different cultural eating styles, which only confirmed her observations about home goods largely being a “monoculture.” It’s not like everyone needs a salad plate

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“A missing part of the industry has been cultural diversity, both in the selling and making of ceramics,” Chang said. It’s ironic to her, considering the crucial role East Asian countries have historically played in the craft: China’s robust ceramics industry, and its exports throughout the world, have made the country’s name synonymous with high-quality porcelain dishes since the Ming Dynasty. Thus, the items she creates for Uniqly have been designed to fit a broader range of eating styles than the typical Western dinnerware set.



Tableware from Lynn Chang’s Uniqly Ceramics.
Lynn Chang

For instance, her “carryall bowl,” a shallow 8-inch bowl is made for versatility. It works for serving family-style meals like pastas and braises, and it’s also flat enough that saucy dishes won’t pool in the center. And while Uniqly does carry plates, Chang rounds out her catalog with smaller bowls meant for households that primarily eat family-style, with everyone at the table plucking their share of food from a collection of dishes on the table.

For Chang, the best way to work with potential customers, whether individuals or restaurants, is to first ask them what kind of food they make. Her recommendations for pieces and commissioned designs naturally flow from those conversations — about whether people will be using forks, spoons or chopsticks to eat; and even what materials their tables are made of. That way, each customer can get a set that is immediately relevant to the way they eat and cook.



Erin Hupp of Erin Hupp Ceramics makes a vase in her East Bay studio.
Gabrielle Lurie / The Chronicle

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That spirit of collaboration is the modus operandi of East Bay ceramicist [Erin Hupp](#), who has been working the potter's wheel for two decades now. Her plates, bowls and tumblers, found at upscale restaurants like Nightbird, [Californios](#), Flour + Water and the soon-to-come tasting menu restaurant Osito, are custom-built to almost extreme specificity: When meeting with clients at their restaurants, Hupp always brings her tape measure so she can better visualize their table settings, dishes and even the diameter of their house-made tortillas.

Her work is texturally rich, featuring glazes that crackle and pop in the kiln and colors that cascade over each other like the melted edges of an ice cream sundae. The drip of a white glaze on a cake stand might suggest the drips of chocolate ganache on the bundt cake set on top of it, while an inky black streak drawn across a white plate can serve as a guide for a contrasting swipe of sauce. It draws attention while being hyper-aware of its ultimate utility.

"My favorite part is when I'm meeting with a chef and we're both energized and inspired and we build off of each other," Hupp said. "The intention I put in my pieces is the same intention people show at a restaurant."

For Hupp, the restaurant is a living gallery for her work, where the public can literally perceive the weight of her craft. "I really hope that people flip their plates over at the end of the meal, especially while at a restaurant that has chosen intentionally to go with handmade objects."



Ceramist Erin Hupp's finished pieces in her East Bay studio.
Gabrielle Lurie / The Chronicle

It's not easy to accumulate such treasures, whether you're just a person in need of a receptacle for your cereal or a restaurant with a tight budget. Plenty of food businesses opt for the simplicity of picking up cases of factory-made dishes from Restaurant Depot or ordering high-end sets that are still more affordable than custom work from local artisans like Sonami, Chang and Hupp. Their prices, which hover around \$40 for cups and \$25 for small bowls, are steep. But they reflect a process that takes years to master and an inordinate time to execute: A single dish can take two weeks to create, from its initial shaping on the wheel to its final firing.

"The cost of a \$5 mug from a big box chain is not up front," Sonami said. While the consumer may be paying less, others further up the chain are subsidizing that price, whether through the low wages they earn or the environmental consequences of shipping cheap products from factories overseas. "Whereas when you're buying from a small business, I think you're really addressing the cost of that mug as opposed to sweeping the unspoken cost under the rug."

The simple act of being able to flip a dish and see someone's name can feel like an act

of rebellion in a culture where we're rarely given the opportunity to recognize the people who make the everyday things we depend on. Do you know who grew the orchid on your desk or the glasses you're wearing, or even where they did those things? We don't, because often the alienated products are what we can afford. Not everyone has the space in their budget for a \$28 soy sauce dish, or the mental bandwidth to consider their saucers. When it comes to the pursuit of tying labor to people, we're all set up to lose.



Candy Boxes, made by ceramist Erin Hupp, are filled with rose truffles and cocoa nibs at Nightbird restaurant in S.F.
Gabrielle Lurie / The Chronicle

But if you can afford to add one precious thing to your kitchen cabinet, consider buying a piece of handmade ceramic. It just feels different when I use my MMclay ramekins at home — when I pile kimchi on them as a side dish to braised short ribs or set a tea strainer onto one to drain every morning. They weren't made specifically for me, but they've inured themselves into my life as if they've always been here. It's easy enough to remember that someone made them: Her initials are right there, on the bottom.

Pala Ceramics. www.palaceramics.com

Uniqlay Ceramics. www.uniqlay.com

Erin Hupp Ceramics. www.erinhuppceramics.com

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By Soleil Ho



Soleil Ho is an opinion columnist and cultural critic, focusing on gender, race, food policy and life in San Francisco. They were previously The Chronicle's Restaurant Critic, spearheading Bay Area restaurant recommendations through the flagship Top Restaurants series. In 2022, they won a Craig Claiborne Distinguished Restaurant Review Award from the James Beard Foundation.

Previously, Ho worked as a freelance food and pop culture writer, as a podcast producer on the Racist Sandwich, and as a restaurant chef. Illustration courtesy of Wendy Xu.

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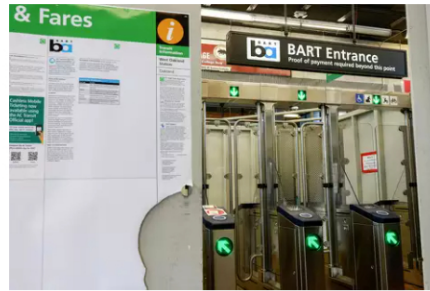
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