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LIVING IN CALIFORNIA

power couple

Partners Catherine Bailey and Robin Petravac at Heath's Sausalito factory.

BAY AREA

MODERN LOVE

As venerable mid-century ceramics firm Heath marks its 70th year, owners Catherine Bailey and Robin Petravac have their eyes on the future.

By Maile Pingel || Portrait by Craig Lee

When Catherine Bailey and Robin Petravac met through a mutual friend in San Francisco in the late 1990s, little did they know they would soon marry, have a son and become proprietors of Heath Ceramics (heathceramics.com), one of the Golden State's most revered companies. With a shared passion for the arts, the Sausalito-based couple, industrial and product designers respectively, jumped at the chance to purchase Heath in 2003. They have since more than succeeded in their goal to revitalize the brand while remaining true to the vision of its founders, Edith and Brian Heath, who started the company in 1948.



"The business is holistic," explains Petravac, who oversees the operational aspects. "We control our own stores and can learn from them." Beyond Heath's original (and still-bustling) Sausalito factory are the showroom and tile manufactory in San Francisco's Northeast Mission neighborhood (which recently welcomed an outpost of bakery Tartine), a petite but packed space at the Ferry Building and a large studio-showroom in Los Angeles. Each venue offers an immediate connection with customers—an insight that has helped guide the couple's plan for Heath. "We're not looking at sales," explains Bailey, the company's creative director, "but at what feels current and classic."

Rooted in the Bauhaus philosophy of beauty in the simplicity and honesty of materials, Heath continues to produce its coveted ceramics but Bailey and Petravac have steadily developed new products in keeping with Heath's ethos. Over the years, there have been collaborations with furniture designer Jacob May, bag designer Sherry Stein and sculptor Stan Bitters. "We want to focus more on depth and creativity of process; not only clay but other materials, too," says Petravac.



New this year, as part of their 70th-anniversary celebrations, is a line of flatware being made in upstate New York at the last American factory of its kind. "We've wanted to do flatware for a decade, so it's especially satisfying," he adds. The couple is also partnering with Finnish firm Artek to create a Heath-tiled edition of Alvar Aalto's 1937 tea trolley, as well as Aalto stools screen-printed with graphics inspired by Heath's glazes. Also ahead are fresh colors for the company's dinnerware lines. "We have a gorgeous new palette with some of the 2003 colors, but also a shiny indigo, a new gray, Rosemary—a deep army green, and a bright yellow called Yuzu."

So what makes it all work? "We want the same things," says Bailey—a bond no doubt felt by the founding couple. "Our North Star is the same, and our eyes are always open to opportunity," adds Petravac. Living with the pieces they create (including one-offs and the Chez Panisse line, a favorite) strengthens their bond, too. And while the designs may be minimalist, "We're not," says Bailey, happily recounting drawers full of Heath. "It's nice to surround yourself with beautiful things, and things that you're connected to." After saving a little piece of California history, it's a well-earned and much-deserved bounty. ■



Clockwise from top left: Heath Ceramics Classic Field tiles in a layered chalk-gunmetal glaze make an earthy, elegant statement; dinnerware from the Coupe line in aqua and chocolate brown; bud vases and containers galore; tiles decked out in a variety of seasonal summer shades.