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"My career has been so weird
and nonlinear. So many
times, I was so uncertain."
—JEN RUBIO
Co-founder of Away



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Inspiring
tales from the
founders of

**AWAY,
HARRY'S,
BEYOND
MEAT,
REDDIT,
MOVIEPASS,
EVERLANE,
CALENDLY,**
and more

HOW I DID IT

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Fired Up
After 55 years, Heath Ceramics was showing its age. Then a designer couple showed up to save it.

Heath Ceramics was strong on cachet, but weak on its balance sheets. Then a designer couple came along to save it.

Photographs by Kelsey McClellan → Text by Hannah Wallace

Fired Up





LOCALLY SOURCED CERAMICS

Since Robin Petravic and Catherine Bailey took over Heath Ceramics in 2003, they've continued working with some of the country's best restaurants, creating dinnerware lines with two of them: Alice Waters's Chez Panisse in 2006, and, in 2016, Tartine, whose outpost at Heath's Mission District location inspired a bright new glaze—Tartine Teal (above). The collection features Heath's signature rim, and extends the company's 70-year tradition of sourcing clay from Lincoln, California. At left, a potter throws a vase at Heath Clay Studio in San Francisco, where experiments with shapes and glazes happen with little commercial pressure.



➤
BLUE SKY THINKING

Founder Edith Heath began manufacturing tiles in the early 1970s at this Sausalito factory, but the new owners “wanted to be where our customers are,” says Petravac. In 2012, they moved the tile factory to a 60,000-square-foot former commercial laundry in San Francisco’s Mission District—keeping dinnerware production in Sausalito—and also opened a second showroom and the Heath Clay Studio.



➤
HOT OFF THE PRESS

A tilemaker working the Ram press, a machine that uses hydraulics to press clay tiles into different shapes, like this retro design created by designer Leon Galetto in the 1950s. Today, tiles are 29 percent of Heath's business, while ceramics account for 55 percent and home goods—ranging from wallpaper to furniture—make up 16 percent.



“We don’t want to be forced to do things we don’t want to do.”

Mention Heath Ceramics to design nerds or high-end restaurateurs, and chances are they’ll fawn endlessly over its retro, midcentury tile or brightly glazed stoneware. Heath devotees are nothing new: Since visionary ceramicist Edith Heath and her husband started the company in 1948, enthusiasts have included architect Frank Lloyd Wright and chef Alice Waters.

Yet the company likely wouldn’t be around today were it not for Catherine Bailey and Robin Petravic. When the couple—designers prowling about for a new project—stumbled into Heath’s Sausalito, California, showroom in 2003, the company was struggling, unable to cover its bills and pay all of its employees. At the time, Edith was in her early 90s, with failing health and no succession plan. Forget diversification or modernization—a lone typewriter was still being used in the office.

After discovering that Heath was for sale, the couple immediately wrote the company a letter. Three months later, the now-70-year-old business was theirs. “The whole process was simpler than buying a house,” Bailey says.

Over the past 16 years, Bailey and Petravic have brought Heath back from the brink by evolving everything from its product lines to its ownership structure, striking a delicate balance between respecting die-hard fans and bringing new ones on board. They’ve shifted the business from wholesale to direct-to-consumer, built a San Francisco experiential destination, expanded into the bridal registry business, and forged creative collaborations with everyone from fashion designers to furniture makers.

But perhaps the couple’s biggest impact, says Bailey, will come from employing a “slow business” approach to growth that enables the company to go all in on creativity, quality, and transparency. Since Bailey and Petravic took over, Heath has steadily grown from 25 employees to 246 and from \$1.2 million in sales to \$30 million, putting it on track to be debt free by the end of 2020. Earlier this year, they even converted 8 percent of the company to an ESOP, with the goal of increasing that to 25 percent. Says Petravic, with the stark contrast of San Francisco’s tech scene bustling around him, “We’re setting things up for the next generation.”



↑ CREATIVITY TRUMPS SCALE

Petravic, Heath’s managing director, and Bailey, its creative director, standing in front of Heath’s iconic, color-saturated tiles. The couple—designers with a 14-year-old son—didn’t want to fall into the trap of increasing volume to meet demand, which often sacrifices quality. Instead, at maximum capacity at both factories, they took Heath in the opposite direction: creating limited-release lines sold only in the showrooms that channel the experimentation and playfulness of founder Edith Heath. “It’s the heart and soul of where we come from,” says Petravic.





UNLIKELY COLLABORATORS

Bailey is always looking for interesting collaborations, like the ones Heath has with Alabama fashion designer Natalie Chanin and with Finnish furniture maker Artek. Pairing her designers with artists who inspire them, says Bailey, allows them to create more interesting designs than they would on their own. It's also expanded Heath into new categories, like textiles (including tote bags and cloth napkins) manufactured in Heath Sews (below), and flatware, which Heath produced in partnership with the last remaining flatware maker in the U.S., Sherrill Manufacturing.



IT'S ALL IN THE FINE PRINT

At Heath's Mission tile factory (top), a small army of kiln posts are stacked on a table, where the public can view them on one of the company's many tours. The showroom there is also a bustling hub of small-scale bakers, makers, and craftspeople. In addition to Tartine, there's a Japanese pop-up boutique, a printer's shop, a jewelry studio, and the Heath Newsstand, run by Ema Iwata (bottom). Launched in 2017, the newsstand—which offers 400 magazines from around the world—is an extension of Bailey and Petracic's deep interest in human-scale, tactile experiences. "We want to encourage a richness of face-to-face interaction," says Petracic.

