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TABLEWARE TODAY

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BY DESIGN ■ SPOTLIGHT ON CREATOR

In 2007, Shawn Laughlin established CASKATA to create sophisticated mix and match tableware whose highly detailed graphics imbue the table with multilayered stories. Visual narration is part of the DNA of the one-time photographer and filmmaker whose artful eye has yielded collections of timeless classics.

by Amy Stavis



www.caskata.com



Rimmed dinnerware – like the designs pictured here – represent a new direction for Caskata. “These patterns offer more traditional options to our coupe shapes, and complement our serving pieces nicely,” says Shawn Laughlin. “The rimmed patterns provide opportunities to tell more traditional stories on the table.”



It seems as if Shawn Laughlin has been searching for what’s just around the corner her entire life. The fast-tracked overachiever graduated high school at 16, college at 19. She’s had incarnations as a photographer, filmmaker, and commercial ad producer. She’s raised three kids and started a successful stationery and greeting card business. For the born and bred New Yorker, moving at a fast clip is her default speed. So when Laughlin thought it’d be interesting to blend passions and talents for cooking, visual storytelling, and designing, tableware was the clear ‘what’s next?’ response to a query she’s been posing her entire life.

“I was itching to do something more,” Laughlin discloses. “Something that combined all my passions, and tableware was the answer.” So Laughlin created Caskata – named for the area where the bay meets the ocean in her beloved Nantucket, the site of many memorable summers as a child. “It was my favorite place,” she animatedly avers. And much like every previous enterprise Laughlin has pursued, she plunged right in. “I’ve always been into plates,” she expresses. “I’ve been collecting since I was eight years old.

Plates have always been a fixation and I must have 3,000 by now.” Laughlin can now add a few dozen to that tally with her own Caskata dinnerware, a fact that amuses and even surprises her a bit. “When I see a pattern of mine completed, I come away invigorated,” Laughlin imparts. “I design tableware hoping that people will love my products as much as I do. I believe every day should celebrate form with function.”

‘Form with function’ just might be the mantra of Laughlin’s life, who has comfortably coalesced artistic tendencies with common sense sensibilities. Those idyllic summer vacations on the Massachusetts isle helped hone Laughlin’s eye for color and texture, and the camera became her medium. “Those vacations provided the initial training for my eye,” she clues. Taking pictures became a lifelong passion and propelled Laughlin to NYU film school. After school, Laughlin ventured into commercial advertising. [Fun fact: Laughlin’s grandmother is rumored to be the inspiration for Peggy on *Mad Men*; she was part of the team that created Clairol’s iconic ad campaigns

Blondes have more fun and Does she or doesn’t she?]

Laughlin’s two-decade long ad career sharpened her visual acuity and introduced a set of skills on which Laughlin has capitalized. “I’d spend days photographing a bowl of soup,” she offers as example, “so I knew how to take a vision and bring it to life. I learned about attention to detail, about managing logistics, and about making sure a client gets what he wants.”

Laughlin married, moved to a Boston suburb, and took time off to raise three children before the creative juices started to simmer again, inspiring her to action, to another ‘what’s next?’ eye-opener. “It was time to figure out what I was going to do with the next part of my life,” she points out. Laughlin returned to school where she learned Photoshop which she used to create a line of greeting cards and stationery. “I love making things and had to find a way to do so



New England landscapes often provide designer Laughlin with creative inspiration. As a kid, she spent summers on Nantucket where she learned to clam, crab, and fish. Those rich colors and textures found their way on to her tableware designs some 40 years later.

while taking care of my kids,” she says. “I took the visual education I honed in film school and commercial production and created a line of cards and stationery,” she says, calling the enterprise a connect-the-dots undertaking because it utilized a number of her past talents and experiences. Laughlin sent samples to local merchants and when an order for 50 dozen cards quickly came in, Laughlin was bowled over. Now she’d just have to figure out how to manufacture so many handmade cards. “That’s when my producer skills kicked in,” she smiles. “I learned printmaking and created a paper company.”

After a year as a card-maker, the burgeoning impresario accepted the fact that she’d have to sell an awful lot of paper to make any real money. “We had a great deal of orders, but each piece was only \$2 and the line would never have huge mainstream appeal,” the entrepreneur acknowledges. “So I had

to figure out a way to translate these sophisticated designs onto something else, something that had appeal to a more substantial offering.”

The amateur cook embraced an *aha* moment when she realized she could transfer the card designs to plates, a 40-year affinity. “I knew we could attract the group who found the paper pretty,” she says, “and tableware seemed like a smart move.” Now she just had to figure out how to do that. But as an established producer, she’s been a longtime problem solver and this was simply another puzzle to decipher. “I wanted something I would use on my table that I didn’t see in the market,” Laughlin suggests. “I felt confident with the story I wanted to tell on the table, but I didn’t see products that told the stories I wanted to tell, elegant multilayered, multi-dimensional stories with unique aesthetic perspectives.”

Operating from her basement, Laughlin created

collage artwork combining any number of images on each pattern. Samples were produced in Ohio. “It’s the last bastion of domestic porcelain manufacturing,” Laughlin declares, “with multiple generations making the products over the years. Some of our images wrap multiple times around a piece, and our decorators take pains to apply them flawlessly.”

That initial start-up six years ago was a five pattern launch – no dinnerware, just serving pieces “One of the most interesting things in starting something new is how much you learn and how fast you learn it,” Laughlin voices. “It really is amazing how you develop skills you never knew you needed to have.” After a year working from her house, Laughlin recognized it was time to take the business to the next step by investing in a warehouse and office. There have already been two expansions; just last year, Caskata sustained another growth spurt and tripled warehouse space to accommodate a “busting at the seams” swell. There are five employees, all women “of a certain age who came back after kids,” not unlike the boss lady herself. “They bring years of workplace experience and wear multiple hats, and we have a real camaraderie which is priceless.”

Financing and manufacturing continue to be Laughlin’s biggest stumbling blocks. “You make your goods and sell them,” she posits. “But manufacturing is a unique animal and as our quantities get larger, we can’t have inventory sitting on a shelf.” So Laughlin sought out advisers at nearby Babson College, one of the top business schools in the country, to tailor a comprehensive study of her operation and proffer suggestions that would take her business to the next level. “My background isn’t business, theirs is,” she notes. “I want to serve our customers well, and knowing how to do that can be tricky. We’re growing fast which is a good problem, but it’s still a problem.” It hasn’t helped that Caskata came to life in rocky economic times. “Getting to profitability has been a hard nut to crack because we keep reinvesting in the business,” Laughlin accedes. “We





pretty much put every penny back into product development, shipping, and working with partners to fine-tune the way we decorate and fire.”

So the savvy exec had to get creative in figuring out ways to promote an unfamiliar brand without benefit of a sizable marketing budget. She capitalized on polished PR skills with a plethora of well-placed editorial in magazines like *House Beautiful*, *Martha Stewart*, *Country Living*, and *O*. Interior designer and TV personality Nate Berkus featured Caskata designs on his TV show and design installations. Social media is another critical vehicle when growing a brand without a pocketful of cash. “It’s important for me to share info with real value,” Laughlin acknowledges. “I’d love to do a blog, but I know we have to make it of interest in order to have a personal conversation with followers. We’re on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Pinterest, and we’re exploring how we share what we share.” Laughlin recognizes that word of mouth only goes so far. “We’ve taken it pretty far already and now it’s time to step up the game,

Caskata launched a line of home fragrance candles available in five porcelain vessels with custom-blended scents.

whether through advertising or other projects that tell our story. Strategic media buys start with the industry and then, I hope, the consumer, but we’ll continue to pursue editorial opportunities

which have been so good for us.”

The Caskata catalog has been featured editorially so often because it’s pretty easy to understand and it’s innovative in approach. There are three themes: gold and platinum; black and white; and blue and white. Each collection fuses a modern, graphic sensibility with traditional themes, like New England sea life and lobster bakes. “We’re a luxury brand,” Laughlin recognizes, “but we’re not unaffordable. We’re always innovating and always creating new designs so there’s something for everyone.”

The design process – Laughlin’s favorite part of the job – can start with a picture. “A week ago I was shooting in Paris,” she says by way of example. “Inspiration might come from a dress, a window trimming, a metallic ornamentation, or something at a flea market.” Laughlin will riffle through stored images to

see what complements existing collections and then sit with tablet in hand, sketching away. “I look at each piece I start to design as a canvas,” she offers. “I’m a foodie so I think of the plate as a frame for the food and a way to elevate the story on the table. I think about the negative space and how to use it well. Photography is all about light and dark and I apply that to tableware design.”

Last year’s big launch is a clear homage to her love of photography. Three black and white patterns, *Yorkshire Hedgerow*, *Leesburg Chains*, and *Persian Empire*, shown on pages 58 and 59, are Laughlin’s modern take on vintage, evoking the character of the places that inspired them. With a rich palette of soft black

Canapés, pictured at far left, are a Caskata stock in trade with more than 30 available designs. “They’re a well-priced cornerstone for us,” affirms Laughlin. “We have them in all of our colors and they’re terrific accents to our dinnerware. We can’t keep them on the shelves.”



Shawn Laughlin brings a filmmaker's eye to her exotic and elegant gold and platinum designs. "We're passionate about making beautiful things and we're passionate about the table," says the designer. The dishwasher- and microwave-safe ware (except for the gilded patterns) often have a hand in the past but are adapted for a modern market.

and creamy white, the design trio works best when mixed and matched. The art decoish *Leesburg Chains* draws inspiration from the horse farms of Leesburg, Virginia; *Yorkshire Hedgerow* is Laughlin's POV of a romantic English countryside; and *Persian Empire* is a sophisticated geometric. The three, Caskata's first mix and match dinnerware collection, received rave reviews at their 2012 summer launch. Last year also saw the introduction of Caskata's first rimmed dinnerware collections. "We made a huge commitment to dinnerware last year," Laughlin confirms. "We started the business with just serving pieces and then expanded to coupe dinnerware. With the addition of rimmed dinnerware all of the pieces tie together as a cohesive unit. It was the natural 'what's next?' step. Our customers are responding to our new directions,"

Laughlin allows. (The Caskata consumer is older, 30s and up, and a confident shopper with a sense of style and sophistication.)

Dinnerware already generates half of the company's sales volume. Serving pieces contribute 30%, and gift items – like new porcelain vesseled candles – contribute the remaining 20%. [Laughlin still maintains her card and stationery line which also has a loyal following.] Place settings range from \$165 to \$225; serving pieces run from a \$45 small bowl to a \$175 large bowl; and gift items range from a \$35 vase to a \$165 cake pedestal. Most giftware comes in the company's signature brown and gold packaging. There are about 300 available SKUs, a figure Laughlin finds tricky to maintain. "We keep introducing new items and it's hard to be disciplined about which of your children you decide to let go," she chuckles. "But we always want to keep the collections fresh and new and evolving. I don't want an unwieldy product mix. I

always edit myself." A design's shelf life is generally three to five years. "I want to make sure we continue to exceed expectations not only from a design perspective but as a manufacturer of truly beautiful pieces in a timely fashion," says Laughlin. "It's important that we do what we do really well. I want our patterns to be designs our customers hand down to their kids one day." Caskata's collections are available at more than 750 independent retailers and department stores. "We're being recognized by stores that I'd always wanted to do business with," Laughlin gushes. "Our designs have attracted exactly the stores I wanted."

So the 'what's next?' Laughlin, while surely not one to rest on laurels, is taking time to reflect on how her lark of a business has developed a robust voice. "The inspiring part of my story is if you have an idea you believe in, you can make it reality," she says. "It's possible to create something from nothing. I love what I do and I'm lucky to do it with people I like. Our vendors are terrific and our retail customers are creative and smart and share an aesthetic vision with us. I've learned that if you believe in what you're doing and are willing to work hard, anything is possible." □

