



HF COORS FUNCTIONAL ART

Writer Suzanne Wright

It was my Aunt Millie, a resident of Oro Valley, who turned me on to HF Coors.

Located in Tucson, it may not look like much from the outside. But once you step over the threshold of this factory store, a kaleidoscope of colors, patterns and shapes are there to greet you. Millie doesn't normally coo; but then, this is a happy place: with more than 50 patterns, countless colors and hundreds of styles to choose from, her reaction is warranted.

And while HF Coors may not be a household name, chances are you've encountered their dishware at eateries across the United States, including Fox Restaurant Concepts like True Food and North; resorts such as The Ritz-Carlton Dove Mountain and Yosemite's Ahwahnee Hotel; and retail shops at The Biltmore and Taliesin West. The company has designed dinnerware featuring the ranching brands of Cave Creek's Cartwright's and Tonto Bar and Grill. Ellen DeGeneres' guests sip from HF Coors mugs. Ever shopped from the Uncommon Goods catalog? HF Coors manufactures many of their dishes, including the bestselling, two-sided ooma bowl for chips and salsa.

People from around the world make a pilgrimage here. HF Coors is a nearly 90-year-old company, one of only a handful still producing 100 percent American-made dinnerware on-site, from clay to molds to fired,

finished and painted dishes — more than 25,000 per week.

Best of all, everything is dishwasher-, oven- and microwave-safe, lead and cadmium-free. And durable — this is restaurant-quality stuff that when used in your home, will last a generation.

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I love the heft and unique look of each thing.

"Isn't this beautiful?" I say to Millie. She examines a butter dish cheerily decorated with Gambel's quail and ocotillo.

"Yep. You gonna get it?"

"I am."

Millie, meanwhile, has fallen hard for a set of dessert plates with brightly banded rings of color. She's sorting through stacks to find just the right color combinations. Each piece is sold separately, so you can build your own set to suit your taste and decor.

Bob DeArmond has been with HF Coors for four decades. He's designed and painted almost every pattern.

"No two pieces are alike in 'Bob's Room,'" says president and CEO Dirck Schou.

Almost on cue, DeArmond enters. Today he has completed roadrunners

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on three platters that are bright and fanciful and capture the beep-beep spirit of the iconic Southwestern bird. DeArmond has also recently introduced plates with yellow blooming palo verdes, the green-barked trees that stud the Sonoran Desert.

Almost all the Arizona animal kingdom is represented: javelinas, hummingbirds, coyotes, cardinals and snakes. And there's more: Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) figurines festoon pitchers and plates, as do Catholic deities like Our Lady of Guadalupe. There's also a sunset and sunrise series that captures the fiery skies of the Grand Canyon State.

But be warned: your first purchase is often the beginning of an addiction — er, collection; a four-piece place setting could set you back nearly \$1,000.

A shopping trip here doesn't have to break the bank. Schou says the number one sellers are mugs, followed by olive oil dishes, dessert plates and platters. They also sell figural bird tree ornaments.

It's obvious the pride Schou takes in his employees' craft and creativity as he leads us on a tour. He bought HF Coors in 2003 and moved it from Los Angeles to Arizona because he wanted a business in Tucson. Schou's a near native; he went to school at the University of Arizona, his parents met there and his grandfather was a professor at the school.

With satisfaction, he's expanded the reach of the company from restaurants to retail, so folks can enjoy his products at home. Schou says when they surveyed their customers, "fun" and "color" were the two comments that came up most often.

"It's functional art," says Schou. "You can hang a platter on the wall or use it at Thanksgiving."

HF Coors has also taken on some interesting and rewarding contract manufacturing projects, like a specially designed mug that is not as heavy as a standard mug, but has a chunkier handle that is easier for arthritic hands to hold. They've also created patterned mugs in celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Western National Parks Association that are based on prehistoric symbols.

Schou asks me if I've been to one of the first Saturday sales when discontinued, "irregulars"



and overruns are deeply discounted?

"Customers start lining up by 8 a.m.," says Schou. "You know Prep and Pastry?"

I sure do. I think they make the best baked goods in Tucson.

"They serve coffee and pastries."

HF Coors is only minutes from downtown and the legendary Mexican restaurants of South Tucson, so I ask where Schou recommends visitors eat once they've slaked their appetite for ceramics? He doesn't hesitate.

"Mi Nidito is great and so is El Guero Canelo," he says. "I also like Roma Imports, a deli that serves authentic Italian sandwiches. And check out the Coronet Café. The owner's been collecting pieces for three years."

As if we need additional enticement to visit again.

Millie's already scheduling next month's outing; she's hooked. Because the fact is, you can't see everything in one visit and there's always something new.

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