



C E R A M I C

WONDERLAND

A trip down the pottery rabbit hole in La Paz leads to an amazing discovery in art, culture and history

-story by Joan Tucker & Paul Papanek | photos by Paul Papanek-

Mexican pottery. I thought I knew all about it. A terracotta plate. Bright blue trim. A painted white bird. Seen it. Bought it. Broke it. In the past few years that I've been in La Paz, I've ridden my squeaky Baja beach cruiser past the Ibarra Pottery Studio at least a dozen times without having the slightest interest in stopping.

What a mistake.

Last week, I decided to see just what was behind that white door next to the multi-colored mailbox. Like Alice, I felt like I had fallen down the rabbit hole and ended up in a fantasy world of artful pottery that is the very real world of Julio and Juanita Ibarra. It's a world of improbable color combinations, patterns, and shapes that made my head spin.

But first – a little history.

Born Julio Ibarra in 1932 in Pachuca Hidalgo – son of a potter, grandson of a potter, great-grandson of a potter – his is a history of art and pottery dating back to the Mexican Revolution. As a child, he learned to throw pots on a wheel from his grandfather. His mother, who was a potter and a painter working at the Anfora factory in Pachuca Hidalgo encouraged him to

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(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT) *Coming from a family with a long history in working with ceramics, and working with it himself for much of his life, Julio Ibarra almost literally has clay in his veins! Julio works the clay with his hands, and his wife, Juanita, paints decorative patterns onto the pottery with with varying bright colors of glaze.*

come and work with her there. As he learned his craft, his creative spirit outgrew the traditional designs he was working on. He needed to develop his own way of expressing himself with his art. At 18, he enrolled in the famous Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City – the oldest art academy in the Americas - to study the art of pottery and painting. Over the years, The Academy attracted students from all over Mexico, including Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Siqueiros. While there, he met the beautiful Juanita Chavez, also a fine arts student. Attracted to each other by their mutual passion for art, they fell in love. In 1958 – two years after they graduated - they decided to keep the family tradition alive and, combing their artistic talents, they opened Acuario Pottery in

Mexico City. They married two years later. The innovative designs and shapes that these two artists developed over the years were influenced both by the European sensibility so popular in Mexico at the time, and by the geometrics of the ancient indigenous peoples of the country. In interpreting those influences, they created an entirely new and original color palette and design esthetic that became very desirable in Mexico City. Soon, the “better families” were ordering service for 12 or 14 in the very exciting patterns that the Ibarras and Acuario were becoming known for. During the height of their popularity, the health of one of their daughters began to decline because of the growing pollution in Mexico City. While visiting relatives in La Paz, they noticed that her health improved

considerably, and in 1987, after consulting with doctors, they decided to move and set up shop there. They brought with them their 4 children, an old kiln, and most importantly, their art. Fast forward to the present... And here I am. It's a beautiful afternoon in La Paz and I have entered their world. I'm surrounded by a kaleidoscope of vibrant colors and energy that reflect the art and passion of Julio and Juanita Ibarra. Julio, at 80, is the most gentle of mad-hatters. Every day, he wakes up and walks into the sun-filled patio that is their studio. He checks the progress of the clay that they import from Oaxaca that's undergoing its 2-month purification – a painstaking process of washing and filtering and re-washing and

re-filtering which results in the smooth and silky clay that is the basis of the pottery that the Ibarra family is known for. Next, he slides onto his tall chair behind his potter's wheel and begins to create. He is the master potter and in addition to throwing pieces by hand, he makes his own molds. There he is, still turning the wheel with his feet, building, shaping, trimming, sponging, and refining – using a variety of tools, worn with age by thousands of pieces of clay. He's eternally waiting for his pots to dry in the sun. A little later, here comes Juanita – his love and his muse – taking her chair at her

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(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT) | Ibarra's Pottery has an outdoor display area, as well as the indispensable kiln. Julio and Juanita's daughter, Vicky works in the family business, and has expanded its artistic output with new ideas of her own.

worktable across the patio from him and his wheel. She prepares her luscious paint colors and, as she's done for decades, begins to delicately paint her original designs onto her husband's creations. Fine lines of flowers and plants, birds and figures, and the original geometrics she has always created, flow from her brush to the dried clay, her paintbrush almost automatically dipping into a little water and powdered pigment, mixing her colors like a fine oil painter about to put brush to canvas. She's always experimenting with color – always looking for something different. From the beginning, she has been the creator of all of the geometric designs. She still is.

At 9 am every day, daughter Vicky arrives at the studio – a place that always gives her a sense of profound peace and happiness – and

assumes her position at her own worktable next to her mother's. Vicky, in addition to taking care of customers, has created her own line of ceramic jewelry that furthers the family's artistic traditions. And, with her parent's encouragement, she has taken many of the original Ibarra geometric designs and pushed them into the most modern of color combinations. She paints these designs next to her mother, while her father bounces from the wheel to the kiln to the clay tanks in a never-ending dance from one end of the studio to the other. He looks over both their shoulders to see what they're doing. His sensitivity is evident always; he can tell their moods by the straightness of their lines or the density of their colors.

The more I look at the shelves full of their artwork, the more I see. I am finding the

Ibarra pottery irresistible and the pile I'm setting aside on the counter is beginning to grow bigger and bigger. Each piece is just slightly different – the thickness of the clay, the variety of the line, the size. More importantly, each piece reflects the hand of the artist. This is what "hand-made" pottery is all about.

The Ibarra family puts their passion into every piece of their pottery. Entering into their workshop is really entering into their lives. The work is their life, their life is their work, and the result is Art, in the purest sense of the word.

Ibarra's Pottery:
Guillermo Prieto # 625, e/ Torre Iglesias y Republica,, Col. El Esterito, La Paz, B.C.S., 23020 La Paz, Baja California Sur, Mexico • +52 612 125 4229 **El Fin!**

