

Above, Café Raven plate: Made by Carr China circa 1930s-40s.

Restaurant ware lives to be touched, to be admired, to be used. And it lives to tell its stories.

So much flattery for such humble, utilitarian china. But go to a thrift shop and pick up a ubiquitous, green-lined dish. You'll notice the weight first and that will give a hint as to the quality with which it was made. Then flip it over and look at the backstamp. Chances are good if it is more than 20 years old it was made by proud American craftsmen in a small-town factory that is now shuttered, razed or forgotten.

But owing to the endurance of this rock-hard vitrified china, these 20th century dishes and their patterns and topmarks endure and can be quite collectible.

Take a look at this Café Raven plate, above, made by Carr China. We were attracted to it simply because we love corvids – ravens and crows. And what a strange topmark that is with an oddly dressed man set against a star, an American Indian, a caricature of a Latino in sombrero and an array of flags. And is that the Alamo?!

What we found sent us down a rabbit hole. The Café Raven was located in Huntsville, Texas (1930-69) and named for Huntsville's own Sam Houston, president of the Republic

Below: Western plates, from left: Boots & Saddle pattern, made by Wallace China in the 1950s; Bucking Bronco, hand-tinted by Syracuse China in 1912; El Rancho pattern top-marked for Olmos Club, made by Wallace China in 1951.



of Texas, U.S. senator, governor of both Tennessee and Texas – and also the inspiration for the slogan, Remember the Alamo.

But what about that weird topmark? It turns out when he was just a teenager, Houston was adopted by the Cherokee Nation and was given the name Colonneh, which means: the Raven. Now the design makes sense.

Fast forward to the 1960s and the civil rights struggle. The Café Raven made the decision to desegregate, but halfheartedly, only allowing in two blacks at a time. As a backlash to this, in the summer of 1965 a major sit-in was held at the restaurant, with some 24 people arrested.

And just to add more texture to the story, a menu from the Raven shows the owner in a booth with a weird taxidermy raven mounted Radified Sanding Sanding Apparent

Above, Logo sample plate: Made by Jackson china as examples of the company's work, date unknown.

Below, Boca Raton Resort & Club service plate: Made by Scammell China circa 1928-30.



on the wall and extending over the table just inches from the table top.

Like we said, a rabbit hole. But we use The Raven to explain the ways of restaurant ware (RW). It can be about collecting beautiful patterns, but you never know where a unique topmark or interesting backstamp will lead you.

RW was ordered by hotels, soda fountains, burger joints and diners, private clubs, company cafeterias, and theme parks like Disney, to name a few customers. The U.S. Army ordered from nearly every American manufacturer for its Medical Department. Name an American fraternal organization and they had their own topmarked RW. And it was ordered for church suppers. And for the pride of American travel, railroad dining cars.

While RW has been collected for decades, it was Barbara Conroy who turned a spotlight on it with the publication of her two books "Restaurant China Vols. 1 and 2" in 1998 and 1999. Conroy highlighted RW by categories and manufacturers with photos of their work, plus information on the companies' histories, backstamps and date codes.

Then in 2000, Jackie and Frank Tromble brought RW to the internet when they opened the Restaurant Ware Collectors Network (RWCN), giving collectors, sellers and researchers a welcoming place to hang out, share finds and trade stories. This turned into so much more over the years as it became a repository for the group's collective research with the opening of the IDwiki.

These members represent the no-rules gamut of RW collecting. There are those who simply buy what they love. There are diehard fans of one shape: Plates are easy to stack and store, and butter pats and handleless creamers with their diminutive size are easy to display. There are fans of airbrushed patterns and elegant hotel service plates. Western patterns. Mugs. Transportation china. Quick lunch restaurants of the early 20th century. Automats. Another subset focuses on a single manufacturer.

While we all tend to find our own niche, we do agree that ideally pieces should have few utensil marks and no cracks or chips. Luckily it is unusual to find crazing in vitrified china. There will be some manufacturing flaws and a few tend to be tolerated.

Our best advice to new collectors is to buy what interests you, do your research, and if it's not a hard-to-find pattern or one with gold decoration, use it,

Right, Quick lunch plates, from top: Baltimore Dairy Lunch, made by Grindley Hotel Ware (England) circa 1920s-early 1940s; White Lunch, made by Maddock Pottery circa 1910-12; Plymouth Lunch System, made by Maddock Pottery with the New Buckingham border pattern, circa 1912-19.



enjoy it and yes, put it in the dishwasher.

Susan and Ed Phillips have been collecting restaurant china for about 30 years. Susan's particular passion is flip-top bowls and Ed has a website devoted to Carr China (CarrChinaCompany. com). Following in the footsteps of a group of RWCN members, they have searched for shards at the Carr China site in Grafton, W.V., and have taken subsequent trips to document 11 other closed pottery sites in West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Ohio.



Above, Mugs, from left: White Tower, 1946; and United Soda, date unknown, both made by Carr China.

The RWCN has now reorganized as a Facebook group and welcomes new members: http://facebook.com/groups/TheRWCN.



Left, Airbrushed plates, clockwise from top left: The Dwarf restaurants, located in Tennessee, made by Jackson China in the 1970s; Kin Chu Café and 620 Club, both located in Minneapolis and made by Syracuse China in 1953 and 1952, respectively; Confucius pattern, made by TEPCO (Technical Porcelain and China Ware Co.) between 1931-68.