



Feat of Clay

Bringing a legendary pottery maker into the 21st century

By Barry Wisdom

Its history is the stuff of local legend: craftsmanship and commerce, created from the very earth and fired by imagination. Panama Pottery has been a 24th Street landmark since 1913, with its two studio-apartment-sized kilns once producing more than 30,000 terra-cotta flowerpots per month.

That was before cheaply produced foreign versions of Panama's classically made, home-dug pottery started edging out its product at cost-conscious garden centers and nurseries, prompting longtime owners Ramon and Arselia Santos to sell the business in 2006 after 35 years.

But there's hope amid the pallets of newly formed terra-cotta containers. Dave DeCamilla, whose DeCamilla Capital Management Inc. transformed the similarly distressed Sorocco Sheet Metal Co. at 36th Street and Broadway into the Brickhouse Art Gallery and studio complex, has similar goals for Panama.

"People won't recognize it when it's done," says DeCamilla. "We'll continue with the basic business—terra-cotta pottery—but we hope to get more use out of the space for classes, for people to use as studio space."

One studio is complete, with an additional two slated to occupy a currently unused loft space. A classroom is also in the works, with a Plexiglas divider allowing visitors to observe the pottery-making process firsthand. Cleared room is at a



Carol Honda is the general manager at Panama Pottery on 24th Street

premium now, but there's massive room to expand.

"Ramon never threw anything away," says DeCamilla, who gestures toward "the boneyard": a massive, 20-foot pile of broken and discarded terra cotta that, if seen in a New York gallery, could be mistaken for avant-garde modern art. Indeed, DeCamilla would be happy if a collector could be persuaded to adopt it. He's already had six 40-yard containers of Santos'

accumulated discards, ranging from wood pallets to junked metal fans, hauled away.

"People can get everyday pots anywhere," acknowledges DeCamilla, who hopes that within a year people will seek out Panama Pottery in its new incarnation as an "artistic clearing house" for large-scale clay, ceramic, metal, wood and glass pieces, as well as an educational center devoted to those wanting to learn how

they're made. Tours are already being scheduled.

Just north of the production building is an intimate outdoor courtyard DeCamilla has earmarked for gallery space that will showcase "one-of-a-kind, big artisan pieces."

But first things first. Getting the core business—traditional terra-

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cotta pottery—back to profitability is a priority. To that end, DeCamilla has recruited general manager Carol Honda and production manager Daniel Davidson, former owner of Sol Ceramica, a ceramics studio on Del Paso Boulevard.

Davidson admits he's got his work cut out for him. While renowned Lincoln clay—an essential ingredient in the firm's three-clay recipe—is still plentiful, parts for the facility's almost-century-old machinery are as rare as Panama Pottery's exceptional craftsmanship.

"Most of the machinery is original. It looks and feels like it's a hundred years old," says Davidson.

"Even the molds, which are 40 to 50 years old, are starting to fall apart," says Honda, who is now focused on restoring the facility and resurrecting Panama's wholesale business, whose customers have been relying on cheaper Mexican and Chinese imports.

Luckily, quality never goes completely out of style and interest in Panama Pottery from landscapers and local retail outlets is growing. "We're working pretty hard to get those back," says Honda.

One success: Don Brown, a buyer for Capital Nursery. His reasons for buying Panama Pottery? "For one thing, it's made locally," says Brown. "And it's a small business that makes good quality products."

Brown says Panama Pottery's top-notch pots are a result of using superior raw materials and old-school production methods.

"The quality of the clay they use is a lot better than a lot of the other manufacturers. Their pots are like fine pieces of china," says Brown. "You pay a little more, but it's an excellent product."

The difference between Panama Pottery's traditionally produced pots and cheaper imports can be felt immediately: They're far heftier.

"People like the thicker, classic look," says Davidson. "Plus, they're highly fired, using old-fashioned kiln

drying. They're not sun-dried, so there's no problem with them coming apart in the rain after a few years."

But Panama Pottery's quality is only part of its winning formula.

A customer for some five years, Capital Nursery's Brown says working with Panama Pottery's crew—past and present—is like doing business with an "old general store," with personal, one-to-one attention.

Part of that attention comes in the form of providing custom pieces on request, such as a new line of extra-tall strawberry jars that Brown says just aren't available anywhere else.

"It's that personalization and customizing that imports can't touch," says Davidson, who is currently working on an oversized, 15-inch coffee cup as a promotional display piece for a local java shop.

Mega mugs are only the beginning, says Davidson, who, with DeCamilla and Honda, envisions a renaissance of one-of-a-kind fine-art pieces that will



Production manager Daniel Davidson works on a large pot

complement Panama Pottery's more utilitarian stock-in-trade.

Right now, "we're basically trying to restart the place and get it productive again," says Davidson, who will add the title of arts and education director to his business card if plans for the company's diversification stay on track.

Already in residence is wood sculptor Adam Bradley, who was referred to Panama Pottery by Brickhouse Art Gallery during his search for an industrial arts studio.

"It was evident the space would work great," says Bradley, who plans to collaborate with Panama Pottery to create terra-cotta reproductions of his original large-scale sculptures. "I make lots of noise while chainsawing life-sized and monumental wood sculpture, so a location near the railroad tracks is perfect."

The sight of light rail trains whizzing by is the only reminder that you're actually in the 21st century, and not back in the '40s or '50s, during one of Panama Pottery's recently resurrected Saturday factory sale days. Honda felt it was time to bring back the lovingly recalled program that's more about community outreach than profit. Big sales aren't unheard of, as when a couple wandered in and bought 400 weathered pots for starting herbs.

Though fancier glazed varieties (white washes and black washes) are on the horizon, there's no shortage of classic, red terra-cotta pots to choose from: pots designed to hold everything from olive oil to strawberries to garden hoses.

"All of the production guys are artists. We can do anything," says Honda.

"On Saturday, it's nice. There's time to stop and talk to everybody who grew up here," says Honda, who can be found showing people around the expansive site between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m.

"There's a connection with those people," says DeCamilla, who recalls when he, too, used to stop by now and then on factory-sale days. "The pottery is made here. There's not too many things you can say that about."

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