

Dynamic Ceramics

Two Paly moms' journey through starting their small business



The plates and vases we use in our everyday lives are not usually seen as pieces of art. But for Nicole Thom and Tina Semba, Paly parents and small business owners of Studioblue Ceramics, these ceramic products represent hard work and creativity. Thom and Semba realized their passion for ceramics through the encouragement of family and the accessibility of the Palo Alto Art Center. Neither had taken an art class before signing up for an adult ceramics class, which helped them discover their artistic talent.

"When I found out that there were classes at the Palo Alto Art Center, I just thought, 'Oh my gosh, that sounds so fun,'" Semba said.

Through the guidance of their Palo Alto Art Center instructors, Semba and Thom began to develop a love for ceramics.

"One of the first classes we

took together was from a ceramic artist named Malia Landis," Semba said. "She does amazing sculptures from porcelain clay featuring birds, feathers and shells. It showed us how versatile ceramics are. We made some pieces in her class that I still treasure."

Both Semba and Thom travel frequently and find most of their inspiration from a combination of Pinterest and what they see in restaurants on their adventures. For example, Thom's trip to Japan sparked an appreciation for the craftsmanship of their ceramic ware, specifically in restaurants due to the active ceramics culture.

"When I was in Japan I looked at different styles [of pottery, and] when we would go to dinner, [I would] see what they were serving meals in," Thom said.

Semba and Thom also share a connection to ceramics through cooking. One of the things that they find most exciting about their pieces is how they can be a functional household object, in addition to a work of art.

"We both like to cook and I started noticing that there are a lot of ceramic artists that have their ceramic ware in popular restaurants," Semba said.

An unexpected challenge for

Semba's work in ceramics was the closure of her studio due to the pandemic.

Working at home for the first time, she found it was

difficult without the materials and guidance provided by the art center.

"I figured out a process and then I bought a slab roller," Semba said. "It gave us more flexibility as we weren't restricted to the hours that the studio was open."

"When I was in Japan I looked at different styles [of pottery, and] when we would go to dinner, [I would] see what they were serving meals in."

Nicole Thom





Thom and Semba are able to continually change their ceramic work by experimenting with different ceramic mediums.

"We find there is enough variation in using different clays and glazes that we purchase," Semba said. "The interesting part is designing new tableware and vases from simple shapes and adding to them."

Semba and Thom wanted to further their investment in ceramics by starting their own small business. They kept their name simple and descriptive. "We named it Studioblue Ceramics," Semba said. "Blue because we both like blue."

Semba and Thom began selling their wares in 2019, starting small by participating at the Palo Alto

Art Center's holiday sale.

"We make so many pieces, and we can't keep them all so it's fun to sell a few pieces so we can make more," Semba said.

Later in their business process, Semba was shopping at a small boutique in Portola Valley, Ladera Garden and Gifts, and noticed that they were selling ceramic

ware.

"It was packed with ceramics [so I] I asked [the shop owner], 'Do you have any local artists' pieces in your store?'" Semba said.

All of the pieces in the store were commercially made. Semba told the store owner, Mercedes, that she was a local artist and was interested in selling her pieces at the store. They packed up their wares and brought them to Ladera Garden and Gifts.

Through word of mouth and chance meetings, their business began to flourish. Mercedes liked their

pieces and made a big order of their work, and Semba and Thom have since done multiple sales at her store.

"[Mercedes] gave us a check, and it said Studioblue Ceramics. I went to the bank and they said you can't cash that ... we had to get our name registered," Semba said.

Semba and Thom created an account under the name and began having regular business meetings to plan out sales.

Semba and Thom enjoy the business they have created from their passion, but find it equally



important to not take things too seriously. Having fun and being creative is their priority. "We feel lucky to have

found a way to express our creativity and share our love of ceramics for giving as a gift or using in your home for all things beautiful, fresh flowers or delicious food," Semba said. "We are always so grateful when people choose our pieces to bring home."

