

HELEN KIRWAN-TAYLOR

Design Spy



Impress your guests with posh plates

Most of us can't paint or design, but we can style a table that makes an impression on our friends (chefs are no exception: Thomas Keller, of The French Laundry in California, serves every course on a different designer plate). Ever since caterers like The Admirable Crichton started turning parties into live theatre, the stakes have gone up; who these days hasn't drunk out of 12in red chalices painted with naked ladies on stilts carrying sushi on Perspex trays?

You can reinvent yourself with every dinner party. 'How many times can you rehang your art collection or show off your wardrobe?' says Libby Sellers, owner of a guerrilla design gallery, who represents several artists working with porcelain, including Khashayar Naimanan. 'Tables are a celebration of design and food. The table itself is a sort of beautiful installation.' The new trend is for mixing old and new crockery, silver and glasses. 'Put a shrub in a soup terrine and call it a centrepiece,' says Sellers.

Everyone from Missoni to Jasper Conran to Versace to Ralph Lauren to Marc Jacobs has taken to designing tableware. The latest is Roberto Cavalli, who has just launched his own Cavalli Collection range of red wine. One vintage comes in a leopard-print black leather box with a serious set of Baroque-style black and gold goblets, £510 for the set, £47 for the bottle (www.deglidei.com).

Drink it - better yet, admire it - at Locanda Locatelli, Zafferano and Cipriani. It fits into the new school of opulence described by Nadia Demetriou Ladas of Vessel Gallery, W11, home of designer tableware. 'It's about bounty,' she says. 'It's no longer about a scallop on an ocean of a white plate.'

No creative can resist fiddling. Give them a plate and they will break it and put it back together in the shape of a chandelier as German designer Ingo Maurer did with Porca Miseria. Or glue it to a canvas as Julian Schnabel did with his Plate Paintings. Karen Ryan finds plates in charity shops and adds words like Violent (above), Deceit and Shame (£250 to £460 each from Rabih Hage). Let your guests interpret the message.



On a plate: Thomas Keller serves each course on different tableware at his restaurants

SECRET SERVICE

If you got creative with your crockery, or just plain clumsy, not to worry. Bouke De Vries will restore your Schnabel or almost anything ceramic to its former glory. Clients range from Grayson Perry to the classic little old lady with her Victorian teapot. Hourly rate, £30 to £40 (020 8960 8010).

Porcelain painter: Khashayar Naimanan



STEALTH WEALTH

Brands are everywhere, so to make a serious impression you have to go the other way. Khashayar Naimanan, a 32-year-old former graffiti artist and RCA graduate, has produced the ultimate in inverted snobbery for the great German couturier of porcelain Nymphenburg Porzellan Manufaktur. Hidden Wealth Classic (left) is an exploration of 'inconspicuous consumption'. The series of hand-thrown porcelain plates and saucers have the design motif hand-painted in gold hidden under the plate. So only the owner knows that Nymphenburg is the Cristal of porcelain makers and this dinner service costs £7,500 for a single setting. Available through Libby Sellers (www.libbysellers.com).

THE INSIDER Tablecloths

CASH

A tablecloth can transform a kitchen. Try a bright Oriental-style print. Tea Garden tablecloth, 160cm x 250cm, £30, John Lewis (0845 604 9049).

CHEQUE

This tulip and rose patterned tablecloth comes in a heavy linen/cotton mix. 130cm x 230cm, £94, Cabbages & Roses (020 7352 7333).

CREDIT

Cologne & Cotton's linen tablecloth is available with this paisley-print border in blue or red. It comes in three sizes, with napkins to match. Iris, 170cm x 280cm, £130 (0845 262 2212).

