

Marietta Run Clay

Susan and Gus Sherman's 'Bluebird Pottery' is a southeast Ohio tradition



Marietta Run Clay is located in Athens County near Amesville.

Story and photos by DAMAINE VONADA

The round blue sign inside the pottery workshop at Marietta Run Clay says it all: "Our items are lovingly handcrafted in the hills of southeast Ohio." For 35 years, Susan Sherman and her husband, Gus, have made hand-thrown and hand-painted stoneware at their country homestead in Athens County. Not only have the Shermans made their living from Marietta Run Clay, but thanks to the popular bluebird pattern that Gus developed, they also have gained an enduring reputation for "bluebird pottery." "Everybody in Athens County," said Susan, "should have one of our bluebird mugs by now, considering how many we've made over the years."

Originally from the Pittsburgh area, the Shermans are both graduates of Indiana University of Pennsylvania. They originally planned to become teachers, but their lives veered in an artistic direction while Gus was attending graduate school at Ohio University in Athens. "He took a pottery class, and that was it," explained Susan. Learning how to build kilns and fire clay, Gus opted to leave the university and work as a full-time potter.

In 1974, the Shermans purchased four acres of land in the countryside east of

Amesville where they planned to live as well as operate a pottery. The property was part of a fruit farm where the young couple had worked picking apples, peaches and berries. It had no running water or electricity, but the land's rural location suited Gus just fine.

"He knew what he wanted, and what he wanted was the simple life," said Susan. Working together, the Shermans established a pottery, raised their son and built their first house out of materials recycled from a torn-down barn.

The Shermans also turned the old farm market building at the corner of St. Rte. 550 and Marietta Run Road into a showroom and workshop for their pottery, which, fittingly enough, they named Marietta Run Clay. Gus was the pottery's artist, and Susan became the business head and also helped with production. "He did all the painting; I did the glazing," she recalled. "He fired the kilns; I did the shipping and billing."



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The pottery's signature bluebird design has been in production ever since Gus created it some 30 years ago. With their rich blue feathers and rosy breasts, the pattern's whimsical bluebirds look utterly endearing, but they also suggest the "bluebird potteries" that were common

southeast Ohio farms in the 1800s. Since farmers worked these part-time potteries only from fall to spring, they were called "bluebird" operations because their kilns went cold about the time that the birds migrated back north every year.

Today, the bluebirds of Marietta Run Clay delight visitors who come to southeast Ohio in every season to enjoy the splendid Hocking Hills and other natural wonders. Its bluebird mugs, plates, bowls, pie pans and other wares are featured in the southeast Ohio Art Gallery at the Inn & Spa at Cedar Falls. At Glenlaurel Inn, bluebird sugar bowls, creamers and vases

brighten the breakfast table every morning.

"Because there are so many birds on our property," noted innkeeper Kelley Leonard, "the bluebird-themed pottery is a really good fit with Glenlaurel."

Since 1995, the Shermans also have made the plates that Glenlaurel presents to guests celebrating an anniversary. The design of the anniversary plates changes every year, and they've been so well-received that Glenlaurel also commissioned Marietta Run Clay to make special plates for honeymooners as well as New Year's Eve plates for its annual Scottish Hogmanay party. In addition, the pottery produces statues and tableware for Glenlaurel that are decorated with Nessie, the inn's friendly version of the Loch Ness Monster. "People like the Nessie items so much that we can't keep them in the gift shop," said Leonard.

Like all of Marietta Run Clay's patterns, the bluebird and Nessie designs are painted on pieces before they are glazed and fired in a kiln. "Since all of our decorations are sealed under the glaze," said Susan, "they will not fade, change or come off." The pottery is made only from Ohio clays, and the glazes are all lead-free. Firing the pieces at 2200°F yields stoneware that is strong and durable as well as oven-safe and dishwasher-safe. Prices range from about \$3 for a small bowl to \$65 for a four-piece place setting.

Several years ago, Gus was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. As the disease progressed, Susan took over the operation of Marietta Run Clay. Although the pottery still turns out perennial favorites such as Gus's bluebird and iris patterns, she has expanded the line significantly in recent years. One of her most successful ideas is little saucers about three inches in diameter. They make perfect teabag holders or cozies that rest atop a mug to keep a beverage warm.

"I started making the saucers as pill holders, but now people use them for teabag holders, butter plates, loose change dishes and even spoon rests by the stove," said Susan. The pottery makes between 100 and 200 mini-saucers every day in assorted



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patterns that include dogs, cats, horses, flowers, snowflakes and automobiles. One bride recently ordered several dozen rose-patterned mini-saucers to use as favors at her reception.

Whenever Susan is at the pottery, people are welcome to visit Marietta Run Clay and watch as she "pulls" clay into a vase on the pottery wheel or deftly paints a bluebird on a mug. Susan gladly gives impromptu tours and enjoys talking with customers while she works, explaining how she uses fishing line to cut off chunks of raw clay or how she loads a kiln. "I'm really into educating," said Susan. "I want this to be a place where people can come to learn, to see, to participate." □

Damaine Vonada is a freelance writer from Xenia.

Marietta Run Clay, 16022 Marietta Run Rd., Amesville, OH 45711. Hours vary, so please call ahead: 740-551-2636 or 740-551-2347.

Weekend pottery workshops

available starting at \$300 per person. For additional information and to place pottery orders online, visit www.fairfax-media.com/mariettarun.

To learn more about the bluebird pottery available at the Inn & Spa at Cedar Falls, call 740-385-7489 or visit www.innatcedarfalls.com. Find out about Glenlaurel Inn's anniversary and other commemorative plates at 800-809-7378 and at www.glenlaurel.com.

The Southeast Ohio Art Gallery

Interested in finding other products created by Ohio artists and craftspeople? The Southeast Ohio Art Gallery at the Inn & Spa at Cedar Falls (740-385-7489; www.innatcedarfalls.com) has an outstanding collection representing a wide variety of local artists, and since the pieces are affordably priced, the gallery is an ideal one-stop shopping — and browsing — destination. "Many visitors," said inn owner Ellen Grinsfelder, "are amazed at how inexpensively they can buy art here." Look for Eric Hoffman's amazing photographs; uniquely functional pottery from Carmen Schulz; Suzanne Hiser's charming wooden bowls with painted birds; exquisite blown glass ornaments and paperweights by Marco Jerman; and Cindy Yeager's joyous stained glass stars.