

An Introduction to Fiestaware Tableware

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Fiestaware pottery is one of the hottest collectible items on the market today. People of all ages and walks of life are drawn to its festive colors and simple lines, and it's easily found in flea markets, at auctions and at garage sales all over the country, but here's what you need to know to choose the best!

A Little History

The Laughlin Brothers Pottery was founded in 1871 by brothers Homer and Shakespeare Laughlin. Both had been potters on their own, but decided to join forces to found the company that would go on to produce the best-selling line of chinaware in history. Originally specializing in whiteware, a type of pottery made from a local yellow clay that turned a clear white when fired, the brothers first established a place for themselves in pottery fame by winning top honors for their whiteware at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. After Shakespeare withdrew from the company in 1877, Homer renamed it the Laughlin Pottery and then the Homer Laughlin China Company, as it is known today. He himself retired in 1877 and sold it to his bookkeeper William Edwin Wells and a Pittsburgh family named Aaron, and even today the company is still owned and run by members of these families.

The company once again made a splash in January 1936, when it launched the Fiesta line at the Pittsburgh Pottery and Glass Show. Designed by the company's art director, well-known English potter Frederick Rhead, the Fiesta series featured the fashionably clean lines of the art deco movement combined with a hand-thrown feel. The bright colors and low prices were especially attractive to depression-era housewives, who took to it immediately and snapped up the pieces in droves.

In the first two years, the line included about 55 pieces issued in six original colors: ivory, yellow, medium green, red and cobalt blue in 1936, with turquoise added in 1937. Between then and 1951, five more colors were added: grey and light green in 1943, then rose, chartreuse and forest green in 1951. Though some colors were added and others discontinued through the years, these early colors are considered the most valuable by collectors. In 1969, the company tried updating the colors to a more earthy palette and altered the shape slightly, calling this new look "Fiesta Ironstone," but the endeavor flopped—after four unsuccessful years, they discontinued the Fiestaware line completely in 1973.

What's Hot, What's Not

If you have some Fiestaware and want to know what it's worth, or plan to start collecting it and want to know what to look for, the [HLCCA](#) is a great place to start learning.

And here are some general guidelines to get you started: As mentioned before, the original colors are more valuable than newer ones. And among these original colors, medium green is the most rare and expensive. As for types of pieces, different color groups have different stars—for

example, egg cups are particularly valuable in forest green and chartreuse (\$90 to \$110). In general, however, the cake plates, vases and footed salad bowls command high prices in all colors.

And a little interesting tidbit about the original red plates: the ingredient in the glaze that makes it turn red upon firing is uranium, which is radioactive. At the time, this wasn't considered a problem—the "Fiesta red" (which is actually closer to orange) was so popular that several other manufacturers added uranium reds to their own lines. The color was discontinued between 1943 and 1959 not because of the radioactivity, but because the government banned the use of uranium oxide during that time for any other purpose than its own Manhattan Project (the development of the atomic bomb!).

Acidic foods like vinegar and tomato sauce tend to leach out and absorb uranium from the glaze, but in 1981 the U.S. Food and Drug Administration said that the radioactivity levels of the plates was low enough not to be a health hazard. That's well enough, but it was later determined in 1994 that the red pieces were also leaking radon gas through cracks in the glaze at levels that are seven times higher than is considered safe. So it's probably best to stay away from those red plates, but only those made before 1972. After that they started using other ingredients to create that vibrant red.

Because of Fiestaware's popularity, many manufacturers have issued knockoffs that are nearly identical to the real thing. Here's a little trick to tell the difference: it's in the concentric circles. On real Fiestaware, the circles get closer and closer together. On the fakes, they are always evenly spaced. Also, keep in mind that when a real Fiestaware piece has a label (not all of them do), it is either molded or stamped in black on the bottom and reads either "Fiesta/HLC.USA," "HLC/Fiesta/MADE IN USA" or "Fiesta/Made in USA/HL Co."

In 1986, in celebration of the company's 100th anniversary, Laughlin once again began production of Fiestaware. The newer pieces are stronger and heavier, are slightly differently shaped, and come in different colors. For a while there was purple, but it was discontinued and is now the most valuable among the reissued pieces. Many uneducated (or just shady) dealers try to sell newer pieces mixed in with old at old (high) prices, so it's a good idea to learn the difference and be on guard when shopping.