

STYLEMAKER

Party Starter

Designer Sally Russell's whimsical ceramic dinnerware and cheery linens make for a happy table.

BY TIFFANY FIGUEIREDO

Chatting with California designer Sally Russell makes me yearn for an invite to her next party.

I know it'll be good, for she is the warm, funny girl, who, hours before a dinner party, realized that she needed place cards for her table. Instead of making a panicked dash to the nearest stationer, she painted clever nicknames on a bunch of beach rocks and had guests try to guess which rock went with whom. Who was the princess? The flirt? The stud?

The rocks were such a fun icebreaker that Russell added Party Rox to Sally Russell Studio, her line of ceramic dinnerware, table decor and linens. Packaged in sets of eight, the markers come in Classy, Sassy and Trashy versions, among others, and have become one of her top sellers.

"'Get the Party Started' is our company motto," says Russell, who was working as a sculptor in California's Carmel Valley when she began making ceramic tableware to supplement her fine-art commissions. In 2002, she and her husband, Chuck Drake, opened a small studio/ boutique where she could focus on her work and where customers could come in and buy the



platters, bowls and vases Russell created. Like so many other great success stories, things did not go completely according to plan.

"The ceramic dinnerware was supposed to be a bread-and-butter project," says Russell. "But little by little it grew. People wanted more and more of it, and I couldn't keep up. Everything was hand-formed. I couldn't keep painting every bowl by hand."

By 2004, the couple had a new baby, Lucy, in their lives and decided to shutter the boutique and send production of the ceramics overseas so that Russell could focus on the designs and on

growing the business.

"I guess my art chapter is on hold for a while," she says. "But it's OK because this is such an exciting ride for us. We didn't expect this to get so big, but now we're talking to investors and really looking to go to the next level."

Her dotted plates and napkins even made Oprah's "O List" in April, a sure sign of success.

Russell's designs are now sold at more than 500 retailers across the country and in cyberspace. Many of her sales come

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SALLY RUSSELL STUDIOS

The effervescent Sally Russell likes the idea of a good party. Some of her ceramic designs, which are made to mix and match, include these vibrant bowls.

Party Starter

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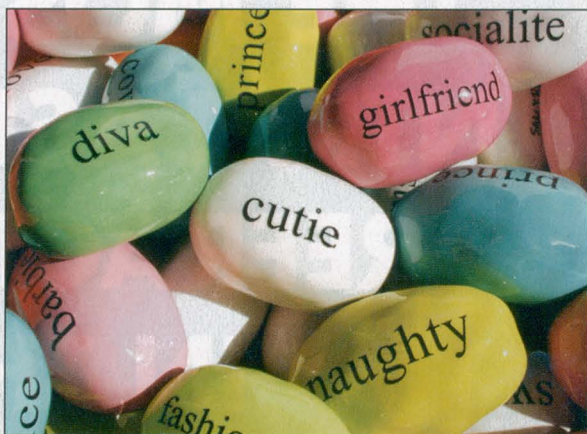
from Texas.

"We're always getting orders and saying, 'Look, another one from Texas,'" she says. "I'm really not surprised. All the Texas women I've met have been such a pleasure to deal with. They're so fun, and they don't take themselves too seriously."

Neither does Russell, who calls her designs "perfectly imperfect." Made to mix and match, her hand-made-looking plates come in a rainbow of bright hues and provide a base for polka-dotted salad plates and bowls. Tumblers, teacups, saucers, mugs and pasta bowls all coordinate beautifully. Irregularly shaped polka-dotted platters pair with multicolored vases that cry out for happy gerbera daisies or sunflowers. It all makes for a tablescape that brings to mind a bag of Skittles candies.

Russell's textiles have the same delicious sense of fun and vibrancy. Bright stripes are mixed with unexpected polka dots in tablecloths, placemats, tea towels, napkins and aprons. Everything is made for everyday use, and nothing is too precious for use by the kids.

Next up on Russell's design board is a children's tea set and matching aprons. "I would gradually like to expand to a



SALLY RUSSELL STUDIOS

Russell's Party Rox started out as a fun way to add punch to placecards at a dinner party. Below, her cotton textiles are vibrant and sturdy and made to use every day.

complete lifestyle brand," she says. "I'd like to have more things for children, women's skirts, more home items ... everything for the hostess with the mostess who wants to live life lighthearted."

Sally Russell Studio designs are available through her Web site, www.sallyrussellstudio.com, or through one of her favorite retailers, Texas-based www.givesimple.com. You can also check them out at Chiffoniers in Fort Worth, the first retail location for Give Simple.

