



Fernando Nieto Castillo |  
Mexico | Ceramics

## Making it new: clay continuum in a modern form



Fernando Nieto Castillo comes from a traditional family clay workshop San Bartolo Coyotepec, Oaxaca. In the 1950s his grandmother, Doña Rosa, invented the shiny finish that is most associated with Oaxacan black clay. This quickly became a favorite of tourists, creating new markets for the craft. His family workshop continues making traditional pottery using his grandmother's technique but Fernando wanted to explore new avenues for Oaxaca's emblematic black clay. Inspired by the utilitarianism of pre-Hispanic clay pieces, he began collaborating with designers, such as Oaxifornia, to create pottery more suited for contemporary use. "A continuum of tradition in a new form," he explains.

Fernando's goal was to experiment with different firing temperatures to obtain unusual, harder, and more metallic finishes, bringing strength and usability back to pieces now usually reserved for ornamentation and display. The clay comes from local mines and is mixed with sand

from the dunes along the local river. Fernando conceives the designs and produces the prototypes and initial pieces; apprentices then help with production. Most of the pieces are hand-turned and shaped, using wooden tools, then left to dry for a few days. They are then hand-burnished using quartz stones inherited from Doña Rosa. When ready, the pieces are fired in a gas oven.

Many workshops in San Bartolo continue to make pieces in black clay, but the market is shrinking due to homogeneity. "I hope this will create a new market for myself and others in the town, to continue preserving the craft for new generations," says Fernando. "We... work the craft so that we may continue to contribute to the development of the community and continue to teach not only our own family, but also apprentices, the way to work the clay now and in the future."

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST