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Lyudmila Zvyagina: “We Are The Best, Because Our Crockery Is Touched Upon By Russian Palms”

The crockery, made by craftsmen of the Russian La Palme factory, is easily recognized by its corporate brand – an open palm. This symbol bears a deep philosophical message: a human hand turns an ordinary piece of clay into a work of art. Some secrets of this mystery have been disclosed to our magazine by Lyudmila Zvyagina, founder and CEO of La Palme company, in her interview.

Before giving the floor to the boss, it should be noted that she has worked in top management positions in the food industry and restaurant business for over 30 years. Ultimately, she got bored with it, and in 2018 году Lyudmila together with her niece Alla and her husband Dmitry opened a family factory, making clay crockery and décor items for restaurants, hotels and retail. In 2023 the turnover of the La Palme small enterprise amounted to about □80,5 million.

- Lyudmila, please confess, what crockery with which brands do you keep at home?

- The first plates and bowls, made by our artisans, immediately made their way to my home, they are still around and I cherish them as a memory of my first experience. Using the crockery, we test its quality and “handling” at home in various applications - dishwashers, washing in aggressive environments, microwave use, freezer storage and outside storage in extremely cold weather. We have to study ergonomics, table layout aesthetics, storage convenience and dryer placement.

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Use of our own plates at home speaks for our complete confidence in the quality and affection for our products.

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- Is it true that all La Palme ceramics are handcrafted by your artisans?

- This is the very essence of it! There is a good reason for historians to claim that ceramics were the first material made by human hands.

The process of making crockery includes several stages: turning clay on the wheel or hand moulding, forming, drying, biscuit firing, glazing and glaze firing. Then artists draw patterns.

Of course, our craftsmen use various modern auxiliary mechanisms, let’s say, electric furnaces. But our craft essentially has not changed much since ancient times: same clay, same potter’s wheel, same forming and firing technology. But if you do not put your heart into your work, even when you are making a plain plate or a jar, there won’t be any magic!

Every day we inspect our products before and after firing. For me this is not just quality assurance, but a specific pleasure I get from our collective work.

You could ask, why do I consider the work of our artisans an art? Here’s just one example. Let us take two seemingly identical plates and look at them from a distance – we won’t see any difference between them. But when we take them into our hands and take a closer look, we would see that each plate has its individual features. And the thing that matters here is that one and the same mould is made by different craftsmen, and this is the reason the plates differ. This is why we consider every product unique, and often a genuine work of art.

Our factory, by the by, never uses decals, because we paint our crockery by ourselves, by hand.

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- Could you please remind us, what is a decal?

- A **decal is a technology for transfer of an image to ceramic products**, not unlike stickers. An image is transferred to the surface of a plate or a mug from paper backing, and then is fixed by high-temperature firing.

After this procedure a picture cannot be washed or rubbed off. This is done at large factories when mass-producing crockery. Our artists paint our ceramics products by hand, with a plain brush and paints.

- La Palme has from its very start positioned itself as an enterprise, making crockery for retail sales, or is it primarily focusing on restaurants and hotels?

- Our enterprise started out with production of flowerpots and decorative interior items, for example, bells, the clay for which was supplied from the Gzhel quarry. But with further growth the company switched over to making crockery.

I wanted to make handcrafted crockery, but I also wanted it to be available for consumers in Russia. And with all that, I decided that the La Palme brand should become recognizable and popular with the Russian buyers.

We manufactured a test batch of crockery from Spanish red clay and small pots from Gzhel clay, and made a retail sales contract with “Tvoi Dom” popular hypermarket chain. Our products were noticed and sold rather well. I realized that the business was going in the right direction.

- Did the factory finally start making good money from this point on?

- I won’t hide it, we made the first retail lot just to support our basic needs. The company had to get going, while we were looking for customers, while we were developing our market.

At about the same time we accepted an offer from our partners to showcase our products at the PIR EXPO international exhibition, which every year gathers hundreds of hospitality industry companies and organizations. Our stand enjoyed popularity. Those people who love beautiful crockery came to us and asked: “Did you bring this all from Portugal?” I have to say, we were pleased to reply: “No, this crockery is made by La Palme, a Russian company”.

Later on, when products under the La Palme brand became increasingly popular, we had an idea to get into restaurant

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business.

- Could you please name some Moscow restaurants that use your crockery.

- The La Palme tableware is featured in such restaurants as Maroon by Arkady Novikov, Sangre Fresca, Claudia, Champagne Charlie's, Layerz Cafe by Glen Ballis, Maya, Eva, Koji, Escape, Dacha, Jun, 345, T1 by Lucky group, IKURA and Gorynich by the White Rabbit Family alliance. They also love us at Chaikhana №1 by Timur Lansky, Uryuk, Khleb Nasushny and in many other establishments across Russia and abroad.

I am especially proud of outfitting the Bulgary hotel, which opened in Moscow under Stella di Mosca name. We supplied interior decorations for rooms, restaurants and spa and accessories for bathrooms.

- Of all your collections, you specifically focus on stoneware and porcelain. What are those materials?

- Both are ceramics, or as they say, burnt clay. It is made by sintering clay and minerals under high temperatures.

Ceramics is a solid and durable material. It is used to make crockery that is durable and chip-resistant. However, stoneware could be heavier and thicker, and it expresses its handmade nature more emphatically. Porcelain is all about delicacy and aesthetics.

Our product range features over 10 kinds of ceramics from Germany and Russia.

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- A few years ago you mentioned that you had about 70 collections and 400 moulds. How many do you have today?

- Now we have more than 470 moulds and 85 crockery collections. Our product range now includes white painted crockery. Our artists will make any wish of a restaurant or a hotel owner come true. They will paint any ornament or symbol on the crockery. No one in Europe would do this.

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- Do La Palme artists work over standard designs or are they completely free to create art?

- We have a brand chef, who keeps the situation under control. We design our models first, then approve them at a council and only then ceramics artists paint art on an approved model.

- What do you usually do when an artist steps away from the rules and does something of his own, something original?

- In any case, our production orders have to be fulfilled! Nevertheless, a potter could stay after work or come to the shop early before the work day start and feel free to make art.

The same applies to an artist, who can paint a product in his own design.

I have set a rule: any creative member of our team is entitled once a month to make one item, fire it and take it home. If this results in something artistic, original, which could be called a work of art, we send it to a store. There the item is sold and 25 percent of its price are paid to the author as bonus.

By the way, one-of-a-kind products by La Palme have their own niche on the crockery market and sell very well.

- The La Palme product mix features interior décor items. What is meant by this?

- Vases, wall art, some hanging items, bells, angels, candlesticks.

- Is clay fashion jewellery even a thing?

- We have a whole artistic range of these. Actually, it was born during the pandemic, when everyone had to stay at home. At the same time, we needed to pay salaries to our employees. We started thinking on how to keep our employees busy, so they do not just sit on their hands. We delivered clay to all our artists, found some pictures and said: “Do anything you want, you have full creative freedom! You can make cacti or some animals!” And our people started working. Ultimately, they made a lot of things and we fired all of the clay items, and we have been successfully selling them in retail ever since.

- What are these, pendants, earrings, or brooches?

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- We started out with brooches, painted with cacti, origami, fruit by our artists. And then we went on to pendants, earrings and rings. Brooches and lapel pins are our bestsellers.

- What bathroom accessories do you manufacture?

- Soapboxes, toothbrush holders, various small vases.

- Is there demand for these products?

- We would not be making them otherwise!

- Lyudmila, please tell us about your team. Where do modern potters and artists, who paint crockery, come from?

- Our staff list counts 43 employees, but this is together with our technical services. We are planning further expansion. Our craftsmen are special people, creative minds. This is why they require a special approach. You cannot talk to them in a raised voice or come into conflict with them, even when they screw up. A proper frame of mind and positive atmosphere are essential for them.

Naturally, we need strong qualified professionals, but there are just none available!

A good half of our artists at our factory are ordinary people, who liked painting since their childhood, and they came to us to try themselves in a new area. And we also have guys with artistic education. They all work shoulder to shoulder, moulding, glazing and painting crockery.

Potters are very much like ceramists. They are all completely different people: some just like moulding, we hire them and teach them the craft from scratch.

How did we start it all up? I took in four students from the Gzhel University, who had to learn the basics of the ceramist skills literally on the fly. Now young people come to us without any special skills, any education, and we teach them from inception. Those who like pottery get involved in the regular process and keep learning with great spirit, gaining experience.

Some fail to adapt and leave. And those who stay, pick up some skill in three months and in half a year start perceiving

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themselves as artisans.

Students also come to us, mostly they work for half a day, after studies. For over three years we have had students from Cuba and Salvador working with us. We very much appreciate their attitude towards work.

- Who do you prefer working with – men or women?

- This is not an issue for me. The only thing that matters is that a person should be decent and love the work of his own hands, putting his heart into his work.

We have a very close-knit team at the factory. We have many young people, there are pensioners and disabled people. But we are all like-minded people, we work over a common cause, this is what matters most!

I, for my part, realize that everyone has a family, people need to be making money. I am trying to create comfortable conditions for them.

- Lyudmila, please tell us, why did you open your first brand “crockery store” in the Botanical gardens at Prospekt Mira?

- It would be more accurate to say a store at the entrance to the Apothecary Garden in the Botanical gardens. We considered a lot of locations in Moscow for selling our products. But young people advised us: “This is a fancy place, there are concerts, there’s their own food court!”

So we chose the Apothecary Garden option. Now we have our Artisan Ceramica brand store there. Just recently we have opened our second store at Tverskaya, 15.

Our “crockery stores” feature their own showrooms. These are designed for restaurant and hotel business and feature exclusive items for such customers. You can look, touch and make an order in a quiet, almost homelike atmosphere.

- Is it true that there are wedding ceremonies in your brand shop at the Botanical gardens?

- Someone has misled you! After civil registry office procedures young couples come to the Apothecary Garden for photoshoots,

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and then sometimes they drop by our store. And there are lots of expensive, beautiful things there. Naturally, a bride just cannot resist being photographed against the background of unique ceramics and painted crockery!

We would like to turn it into a tradition and plan to build a very beautiful poppy flower arch for newlyweds next year.

- Someday the fame of La Palma crockery will reach out to foreign buyers. Have you thought about promoting your products, let's say, in China or Europe?

- I don't see much sense in going to China – they have their own business, their own ceramics style. Our distinctive feature is handcrafted crockery. I hope that Europe will greet us with open arms. Though the La Palme store at Tverskaya Street is already getting a lot of foreign visitors. Western diplomats take crates of our crockery back home with them! Arabs are totally thrilled by the La Palme brand products. There are dealers hovering over us, who would right away start delivering orders to Berlin or Paris, but there are sanctions in their way.

We are the best, because our tableware is touched upon by Russian palms.

- What are the relations of the company with the Moscow Government?

- They are cooperating with us. The city authorities run a very interesting "Made in Moscow" project, where we are delighted to participate. The Mayor's Office organizes various exhibitions, where we can showcase and sell La Palme products. Our factory was just recently featured at the Interior and Design Week this spring at the Manezh and at the forum festival "Territory of the Future. Moscow 2030" at Bolotnaya Square.

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