

COUNTRY CHIC

Natural themes and city chic create a countrypolitan design craze.

by Mary Gerlach

After the winter shows of 2010, the editors of *Giftware News* compared notes on their finds. One major theme arose, and that was a new style in kitchen décor — sophisticated country (you can read our report on The Country Kitchen in the March issue). A longtime staple of the decorative accessory category, country motifs in dining and entertaining actually proved their selling power in accents for the rest of the home.

At the same time, the comforting, familiar imagery, traditional patterns and colors, and old-world charm have remained popular in other rooms in the home. The industry is ready to rebound from a down economy, and consumers as well are looking for a bright spot to hang their hopes on. Countrypolitan — a city-meets-country design style — is proving to be a reliable theme appealing to consumers in rural homes and urban lofts.

COUNTRYPOLITAN LIFESTYLE

Consumers decorate their homes to reflect their own personalities, so someone in search of countrypolitan décor will, naturally, favor natural imagery with a casual elegance. Sorella Home is tapping into this refined rustic look with its new Ernest Hemingway licensed collection. Although the company's approach is young and modern for today's



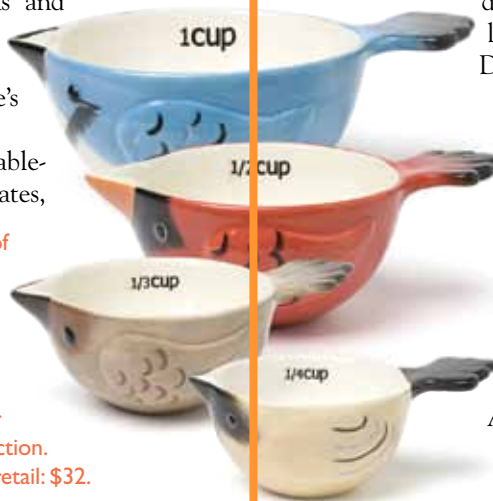
The New Fall Traditions 2010 catalog from **Grasslands Road** (914/345-2020 or www.grasslandsroad.com) includes the Indian Summer collection composed of a large tureen with ladle, small tureen, cheese tray, sunflower bowl and sunflower au gratin dish. Suggested retail: \$15-\$66.

customer, Sorella Home tableware — from hand-painted ceramics to mouth-blown glass — is meticulously created in Europe by artisans whose craft has been handed down through generations. The company's philosophy includes the celebration of the artist and the timeless tradition of high-quality craftsmanship.

"The Sorella Home customer is about a relaxed lifestyle that works for the way we live today with a specific appreciation for high-quality craftsmanship and unique designs," explains Sorella Home's founder Terri Casner. "We have now abandoned all that pomp and circumstance, but what has remained is the art of creating a beautiful table and environment. Today's customer is about blending different products, elements, life experiences and family traditions and lending one's own personality to the style's final outcome."

The chic tabletop Sorella creates,

A ceramic flock of birds measures ingredients in bright colors and charming design. From **Abbott** (800/263-2955 or www.abbottcollection.com). Suggested retail: \$32.



she says, "are focused on sophisticated designs that are still warm and inviting and evoke emotion. It is about rich fabric-like textures, organic and natural materials, a neutral color palette and organically inspired designs that have unique shapes for an urban-chic appeal." Floral and botanical images are particularly popular within countrypolitan décor, she adds, noting that "designs that engage and soothe us are very important in creating a home that expresses warmth and emotion."

"We also follow fashion trends very closely," Terri says. "Textiles and fabrics are today's canvases. For example, the fashion runways have been rich with floral and other organic prints. Our Fiori and Botanica Collections are in perfect sync style-wise and so timely with a fresh expression of a floral theme." Additionally, using traditional crafting technique in new, inspired ways ignites the creativity for the company's artists. "The idea

is to combine our collections in unique and fresh ways with other products on the market. The new country, or Countrypolitan style, is all about combining natural elements with a more sophisticated design," Terri concludes.

OUTDOOR IMAGERY

Country décor, like all things, continually evolves as artists and product designers find inspiration in travel and nature. For Alice Backman, the president and visionary behind Alice's Home & Cottage, the inspiration has always been nature, but she says after decades in the industry, she's exploring more and more mediums.

Years ago, when she first started, Alice says, country décor consisted of dark colors and German designs inspired by life in Pennsylvania Dutch country. "I always had a needle and thread in my hand, and I thought I should do something with this skill, and my love is the natural aesthetic." It's no wonder then that Alice's watercolor country designs feature imagery from fields of wild-

flowers and vegetable gardens. In addition to the artists' natural inspiration, Alice's Cottage products "have a purpose," she says. "You don't just sit it on a shelf and admire it."

Alice started the company that bears her name in a summer kitchen and hired seamstresses to help her complete her products. After a few gift shows, she says, rep groups approached the company, and it's products are now available across the country. "We grew, and the company was nurtured by my love of nature and fabric. We started as a cottage industry and we were stenciling, because that was the thing to do in country in the '80s." Flash forward to 2010, and Alice's Home & Cottage has transitioned



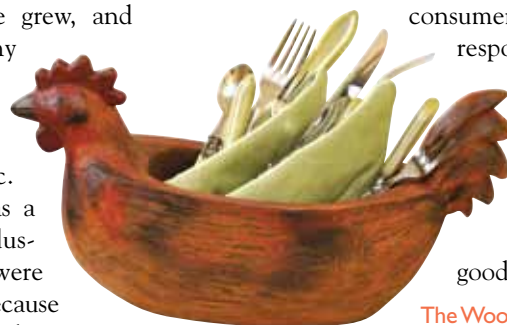
The Owl Rice Stitch pillow from **C & F Enterprises** (888/889-9868 or www.cnfei.com) has a textural rice-stitch embroidery on a cotton canvas. Suggested retail: \$39.99.

from dark colors and stenciling to incorporating quotations on its functional products.

From dish towels and aprons to throw pillows and table runners, consumers (and retailers) are looking for pieces that add value to the home. Function is especially important as consumers have more obligations and busier lives. "My consumers all work now. They are leading two lives now," Alice comments, of the working moms who add touches of country to their homes. "They come home and want to be surrounded by things that are attractive." She explains that women especially will carry themes throughout their homes if it appeals to them. Sunflowers are popular, she says, but busy consumers may even love images of dogs and pets in home accents.

"I see trends change by observing everything. Change is the only constant," she notes, but "I still do what I love in my heart." One of Alice's favorites is the lavender sachet with a message of hope on it. "I love quotes, and I am inspired by quotes that have a meaning and things that have hope," she says. "We all hit bumps in the road, and I like products with a sense of hopefulness."

In addition to pursuing what she herself enjoys, Alice notes that consumers have a strong response to products that are made in America and priced affordably. Ultimately, Alice explains that her country-chic home goods combine all the



The Wood Rooster Shaped Container from **Caffco** (800/390-1193 or www.caffco.com) in distressed red yellow measures 15"L x 5"W x 4.25"H. Suggested retail: \$39.

COUNTRY CHIC

things she and her loyal customers like: American-made, inspiring, attainable prices, function and beauty.

WHAT'S OLD IS NEW AGAIN

Keeping in mind that trends change even for country décor, the folks at The County House Collection find inspiration in the past. "We focus on reproductions of antiques for the

most part," says Norma Delano, who founded the company some 25 years ago with her husband, Mike. "We also create products inspired by vintage fabrics, things like curtains, placemats, runners, tree skirts, rugs and other useful items," she adds. "I would have to say that 'old things' are nearly always our inspiration."

The product team thrives on

reinventing and re-imagining its inspiration to set itself apart from competitors. "We love creating

A oval metal tray in distressed red from **Creative Co-Op** (866/323-2264 or www.creativecoop.com) is in the company's Casual Country collection. Suggested retail: \$25.99.



things that give our customers something different to create excitement in their shops," Norma explains. She adds that "it's important to have varied textures and materials in a display."

As the company approaches the 25th anniversary of its retail business in October, Norma observes that the industry has experienced a significant amount of change. "We have definitely seen lots of changes. I believe in some ways country has become more sophisticated, but in other ways many people seem to still go for a primitive style. I do think that primitive style has become more authentic with time, however."

Consumers are making purchases and selecting designs that will last a long time, she says, and they are also on the lookout for a good value. "I believe our customers are people who care about homes and families, and that comes across to customers in their shops. People who love country home décor are all ages, male and female. Many actually have eclectic tastes and do lots of different styles in their shops." The same can be said of the consumers who purchase country décor, Norma adds, as The Country House Collections' "accessories work well in traditional and even contemporary homes."

With country home accents reaching broad appeal, Norma explains that it's easy for any gift retailer to incorporate the merchandise into his or her store. "They need enough



The Aromatherapy Pillow from **Alice's Home & Cottage** (800/288-7977 or www.alicescottage.com) is delicately scented and filled with pure French lavender flowers. Choose from an array of silk-screened images on 100-percent cotton that features the original artwork of founder Alice Backman. Suggested retail: \$16.

compatible merchandise to make a statement," she says. For its part, The Country House Collection is always using its old-time inspiration to create new products. "Some of the new things are quilted pieces and new fall and Christmas décor," Norma says.

NATURAL INSPIRATION

Country designs are appealing to more and more consumers from diverse backgrounds. Likewise, the creators of such products are taking their design inspiration from many places and styles, too. Inspiration for country décor, says Tamra Bryant, vice president of product development for Creative Co-Op, comes from "natural fibers and colors such as woods, linen, burlap [and] patinaed metals with reds, oranges, golds, creams and grays." Vivid shades of purple, aqua and green, she adds, also influence design especially when "mixed with the natural textures and materials, while others are being mixed with cleaner lines, bright whites and blacks for a slightly more contemporary feel." As for popular design motifs, "many come from nature as this is a strong drive among consumers at the moment." Tamra says. "Also collage-style motifs are strong; they can be contemporary or vintage depending on the setting or atmosphere you use them in."

The direction a Creative Co-Op line goes may vary, but at its core, the company strives to combine trend-driven merchandise with value pricing. This opens the company up to larger audiences "through our variety of price points and the breadth of collections," she says. The eclectic mix of country-chic designs lends itself to finding a fan base that seeks gifts of personal expression. "We like to think of our product as uniquely personal home accents," Tamra adds. These



Handmade in Italy, the ceramic Fiori tableware line from **Sorella Home** (973/376-1140 or www.sorellahome.com) is available in four different floral motifs hand-painted by a master artisan. Suggested retail: \$68-\$120.

Handcrafted with Pride In the USA!

www.sawdustcitywholesale.com

PRODUCT UPDATES! • MONTHLY SPECIALS! • ENTIRE PRODUCT LINEUP!
Log on now to browse and order, or contact us for a login!

Peace On Earth Believe Wonder Rejoice



CHRISTMAS IS NOT IN THE PRESENTS,
But In His Presence.

Seasons & Holidays
Seaside & Vacation
Lake & River
Cabin & Cottage

Spiritual & Inspirational
Pet & Animal
Family & Friends
Wedding & Anniversary

Humorous & Sassy
Hunting & Fishing
Food & Drink
MUCH MORE!

SIGNS • FRAMES • FURNITURE • DECOR

OVER 40
SAYINGS!

In 4 frame styles,
plus NEW natural
bark-edge frames
and sign boards!



Great furniture for display,
storage, function,
and style!



Check online for the latest designs!

Sawdust City LLC

800-528-6008 fax 800-717-3132

Handcrafted
in Wisconsin

Pine Furniture,
Decor, Displays, and
over 2,000 signs!



www.sawdustcitywholesale.com • sales@sawdustcitywholesale.com

Best prices, fastest shipping. Orders shipping in 1-2 weeks!

MAXIMIZE PROFITS! RE-ORDERS SHIP FAST!

Circle 194 on the card for more information

COUNTRY CHIC



The new Country Christmas Florals line from **The Country House Collection** (410/749-9420 or www.thecountry-housecollection.com) combines berries, rusty bells and stars, and greenery to create a country Christmas look. Suggested retail: \$2-\$29.50.

customers in turn exert a great deal of influence on the final products, as the company continuously responds to their feedback and special requests.

As the company evolves, so too does the category. Tamra explains that "country has evolved in many ways; it used to be regional, but now we see it selling successfully across the nation. It used to consist of country red, roosters, pigs and cows." She echoes Alice Beckman's sentiment that function plays a sig-

nificant role in product development these days. "We now have sophisticated items with many functions, and we see aquas, yellows, blues and natural fabrics and materials," Tamra says. She draws comparisons to the evolution of new country and the development of shabby chic some 10 years ago.

For its part, Creative Co-Op has been able to adapt to trends and set trends by listening to feedback and staying in touch with customers, Tamra says. The company always looks to other portions of the gift and design industries to offer truly unique products. "That's what makes our jobs such a challenge and motivates us to keep learning, looking and staying in touch with our customers."

BUILDING ON BROAD APPEAL

There are certain companies too large and varied to pin down to one style, Betsy Spivey, marketing manager of Caffco notes. "It's hard to define our style," she says. "We sell to garden centers, to designers and gifts centers. It's [also] hard to define our customers."

That's why we try to offer so much. There are so many people we sell to."

Caffco, which works with artists (including two new additions) and sources decorative accents from across the globe, stays current with popular designs, Betsy says, but the company doesn't focus on one or two trends in its effort to appeal to more retailers and larger merchants.

The work to stay in step with purchasing habits begins six to eight months before a line is introduced, Betsy explains. "We have product-development people who get together months prior to a season to develop collections of what they want to present the next season," she adds. In fact, the company has already started to plan for Christmas 2011 and select themes and colors for various lines. "As far as country décor, that is always popular. Spring 2010 we have a

The "Do What Makes You ..." wall hanging from **Sawdust City** (800/528-6008 or www.sawdustcitywholesale.com) brings interest to room accents with its artistic arrangement of fonts and words. Suggested retail: \$21.



The 15" patchwork tablemat in the Nancy's Nook line from **Victorian Heart** (888/334-3099 or www.victorianheart.com) can be used as a placemat or end-table cover. Available in 17 other designs. Suggested retail: \$9.99.

collection called Farmer's Market with chickens, roosters and pigs, which are very popular." Farmer's Market, she says, is one of the best collections in the company's catalog. When lines such as these perform well, Caffco is apt to keep the products for another year, too.

The variety in design is not limited to Caffco's own catalog. Betsy notes that among country décor creators there is great variety and differences. "It varies considerably; there are traditional country décor [and more modern styles], but ours are just accessories that will really fit in just about anywhere. I have a friend whose home is very elegant, but she loves roosters," Betsy says as an example, "and she has three or four in her kitchen. It depends on how you use country." ❧

THINK OUTSIDE THE FRAME
Gallery Quality Mounted Art & Photography

Lightweight . Easy to Hang . Large Range of Fine Art Images

FREE SAMPLE

STYLAMOUNT™
THINK OUTSIDE THE FRAME

www.stylamount.com

Circle 221 on the card for more information

Men's Gifts and Historic Collectibles

A safe & unique way to collect and display exciting pieces of history from the nation's largest importer & distributor of non-firing replicas and accessories.

COLLECTOR'S ARMOURY, LTD.

Over 600 unique products: Old West, Civil War World War II, Colonial, Medieval & more. Call us for a free catalog and dealer price list. Dropship services are available. Visit www.CALTD.com for Trade Show Information.

Collector's Armoury, Ltd.
Source Code GN
PO Box 1050
Lorton, VA 22199
800-336-4572
www.CALTD.com

Circle 222 on the card for more information