



Plate turners of the world, unite

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EAST LIVERPOOL -Plate turning is a venerable, time-honored tradition among East Liverpoolians, no matter where in the world they may live. But the advent of Facebook groups and, more recently, Starbucks' discovery of East Liverpool are bringing plate-turners together like never before.

At least that's the way Leon Rubin sees it.

Rubin, 57, an East Liverpool native who now lives in Dahlenega, Ga., is the founder of the "Plate Turners of the World, Unite!" group on Facebook. On Saturday, he used the 45th annual Tri-State Pottery Festival as an occasion to bring some of those group members together.

"We all turn plates, and, it turns out, we're all over the world," Rubin said, noting that the group's 190 members come from as far away as England and from all over the United States.

"Plate turning is an act of pride in our status as pottery capital of the world," said Sarah Webster Vodrey, director of the Museum of Ceramics in downtown East Liverpool.

Sixteen fellow plate-turners gathered at Mulberry Street Grill on Saturday to talk about that peculiar practice known as plate turning and how it reflects their pride in East Liverpool's pottery heritage. It was the second such gathering organized by Rubin.

"The plate-turning thing has been going on pretty much my whole life, but it was formalized more recently on Facebook," said group member Dennis Thompson, 57, of East Liverpool. "It's our claim to fame."

Rubin started the group last year after realizing there was a growing number of people on Facebook interested in posting information and pictures about East Liverpool area potteries, back stamps and ceramic products.

"Lots of people post photos of plates and other ware that they find all over the country with local pottery markings. People tell stories about themselves, their parents and their grandparents who work or worked in the potteries. Collectors offer tips to novices," Rubin said. "It's a fun bunch."

Linda MacBurney Ruscher, 63, of Clayton, N.Y., said she joined the group because she's been a plate turner all her life. She drove eight hours to be with the group on Saturday.

"I was a plate turner before it was the thing to do, as long as I can remember," she said. "If you're from East Liverpool, you do it instinctively."

A graduate of East Liverpool High School, Ruscher worked at the Homer Laughlin China Co. for one year and the Hall China Co. for four years. She was a handler, a dipper and a sponger.

Although she left East Liverpool in 1979, she remains proud of her hometown and an unabashed plate turner. "I get funny looks all the time," she said. "I was at this restaurant called the Villager one time, and there were these plates that looked familiar. These ladies at the table next to me were looking at me, and my husband said, 'She does this all the time!' "

Ruscher used to flip plates to see whether it was something she or a family member made. Now it gives her a feeling of connection to her hometown.

"I always get a proud feeling when I find (something local). It makes me feel like I have a little bit of home with me," she said.

Ruscher said she likes to patronize Applebee's restaurants because they use Homer Laughlin ware. Rubin said he chose Mulberry Street Grill for his plate-turner gatherings for the same reason.

"They have made a commitment to use all locally-made dishes," he said. "I'd love to keep this going."

That pride in locally-made goods has caused the Facebook group to grow recently - ever since Starbucks announced that it was having some of its mugs made by East Liverpool manufacturer American Mug and Stein, formerly Pioneer Pottery.

"We've probably gained 10 new members in the past week," Rubin said. "It has really evoked a tremendous sense of pride in East Liverpool among the members of our Facebook group, who are so proud that Starbucks found our little town to have this new product made in."

Saturday's lunch gathering was abuzz with news over where the "Indivisible" mugs can be found and where they are sold out. One member had a mug with her.

"It's been great to see that excitement and positive energy about East Liverpool," Rubin said. "I hope that what Starbucks is doing is a positive sign for the future. We've got to hope for that."

Among those attending Saturday's lunch event was museum director Vodrey, who's been fielding queries from the national news media all week. But at lunch, among friends, she held up a wooden coin that the museum sells for a dollar.

The wooden coin, she said, is "a fun way to explain to people who give you quizzical looks what you're doing when you turn plates over."

The coin reads, "Bearer entitled to turn pottery hither and yon to see who made it, where, and when!"

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