

Pottery created by four brothers is shipped around the world

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MOUND BAYOU, Miss. | A small Mississippi town founded by former slaves is home to the only shop in the world where Bayou Blue colored pottery is made, and people have traveled thousands of miles to get there.

Inside Peter's Pottery, the Woods brothers — Peter, Joseph, Arthur and Sandy — sculpt clay designs of animals, pitchers, and trays and then sell them from studio shelves.

Much of the artwork is in Bayou Blue, a grayish, navy color that's become a favorite among customers — some from as far away as Germany.

"Nobody else can make that color unless I give them the formula," says the eldest brother, Joseph, who has no intention of giving away the family secret.

The brothers' pottery is shipped across the country and abroad. One piece is in the possession of the U.S. president.

"One of the elephants I did went to President Bush right after he was elected," Peter Woods says.

There is a success story rare these days in Mound Bayou, a predominantly black town of 2,100. At the turn of the century, Mound Bayou was a thriving community of black-owned companies, including a bank. By the 1950s all that had changed.

Opening a business here was no easy feat, Peter Woods says.

"We couldn't borrow. Nobody wanted to lend us money," he says.

So the brothers pooled their money, rolled up their sleeves and began building the 8,000-square-foot studio on family-owned land.

Peter's Pottery has been profitable ever since the doors opened in 1998, the brothers say.

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Joseph (left) and Peter Woods talk in their store showroom in Mound Bayou, Miss.

divulge specifics about the company's profits.

Expansion plans include opening a restaurant and reception hall. They have planted a garden behind the shop, offering a scenic retreat for customers.

Although the shop is only three years old, the brothers have been honing their artistic skills for decades. All four worked as apprentices under master potters in neighboring Merigold. Joseph Woods, 52, started sculpting when he was 9.

Using clay from a large pit in Macon near Columbus, the brothers turn out between 800 and 1,000 pieces a year. The price ranges from \$10 miniature vases to \$300 umbrella stands.

Robbie Willis sells the Woods' pottery in both of the Talk of the Town stores she

co-owns in Oxford and Batesville.

"It's our number one line," Willis said. "There's just a big market for it. It's kind of a cult thing in Mississippi."

Neither Peter Woods nor Robbie Willis can pinpoint what makes the pottery so popular. Peter Woods said people have driven all the way from Arizona to visit his shop.

Natalie Tinnin of Oxford said she has about 10 pieces of the pottery.

"One thing I like about it is that it's a Mississippi-made product," Tinnin said.

Willis said the pottery has put a new face on her business.

"We were The Clothes Corner, but we changed our name and don't sell clothes at all now. We're 90 percent gifts and most of that is Peter's," Willis said.