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STYLE & TRAVEL

OBJECT OF DESIRE | Eclectic Tableware



THE MIX-AND-MATCH TABLE: Dana Cowin, editor of Food & Wine magazine (at left), with her 1952 Raymor by Roseville set, the first plates in her 500-piece collection.

Below, left: Ms. Cowin layers a hand-painted Emma Bridgewater egg cup atop an anonymous midcentury glass plate and a plastic French Bull dinner platter.

Below, right: For a black-and-white themed dinner, she combines designs by Marimekko, Fornasetti, Pieter Stockmans and others.



As 5 p.m. rolls around, the big question for most moms is what they will make for dinner. For Dana Cowin, it's how she will set the table.

About once a week, Ms. Cowin, editor of Food & Wine magazine, draws from her more than 500-piece collection to create the perfect place setting. Ms. Cowin, 52, lives in Manhattan with her husband, 12-year-old daughter and 9-year-old son. On weekends, they travel upstate to their house in Arden, N.Y.

Ms. Cowin's plate collection, which ranges from traditional chintz-patterned dishes to plastic Target plates and bowls, grew, in part, from her love of entertaining. She usually doesn't display her dishes, preferring to show them off by setting them on her mirrored dining room table. "Eating is fun, plating is fun and creating a party is fun," she says.

Ms. Cowin often hosts themed dinners centered around the plates. She will serve Chinese cuisine on her Asian-influenced blue-and-white dishes, or comfort food on top of her grandmother's old-fashioned

orange-and-brown Copeland Spode china.

One favorite theme: Black-and-white parties, set on ceramics by Jonathan Adler and Wanderlust, and china by Fornasetti. "It's very easy to do black-and-white food," she says, citing risotto with truffles, charred eggplant, pork with a blackened herb crust and black-and-white cookies.

When building her collection, Ms. Cowin thinks about how food will look on each plate. Flat plates with large, shallow wells work best for serving dinner portions, and small, deep bowls help keep soups hot. Food shows particularly well on blue plates, she says ("No natural food is blue"), but can get lost on green and pale gray. ("It's like plating on dirty dishwater.")

Her collection began in 1982, somewhat unintentionally, when her father gave her a set of Raymor by Roseville plates to adorn her first New York apartment. "I love how modern the shapes are," she says. The contemporary white ceramic dishes feature an oval shape and a simple design, lending a modern feel to the 1952 collection.

Ms. Cowin held off buying wedding china for 12 years after she got married, until she found the right thing. What finally caught her fancy was a sleek, unadorned set designed by Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius for Rosenthal that she spotted at an estate sale in Sharon, Conn. (She bought the whole set for \$350.) It was complete until the first time she used it, when her friend's son cracked a plate over his head and broke it in half.

While she owns a few complete collections herself, Ms. Cowin enjoys layering her dishes. "I like to tell little stories. Mixing and matching helps me create a mood," she says, setting a blue patterned bowl on top of an off-white Raymor serving plate with indentations for thumbs. One of her favorite pairings? A bright rainbow polka-dot plastic bowl on top of a transparent striped plate.

Ms. Cowin has never had her collection appraised, noting that its value is mostly emotional. "It's not a collection that's an investment. It's all about the pleasure that brings," she says. —Sanette Tanaka

Dana Cowin for The Wall Street Journal ©