

The humble plate – designer **Nick Holland** talks shapes, decals and, most importantly, designing them



## Nick Holland

Nick Holland Design is an award-winning product design company that specialises in tableware and housewares. After a career as design director in the ceramics industry in England and Portugal, including 13 years with Vista Alegre, Nick now works with leading manufacturers in Europe, USA and Asia to create successful, beautiful and timeless products for retail and hospitality markets.

[www.nickhollanddesign.com](http://www.nickhollanddesign.com)

Xisto Black

The plate: a simple functional object that has been around mealtimes for thousands of years in various guises and materials – stone, clay, leather, wood, metal, glass.

Since the discovery (in ancient times) that clay could be heated to high temperatures to create a strong and stable material, the functional ceramic plate for food was born. At first formed by hand and undecorated, things have since moved on a bit!

For eating and dining, the plate is usually the most important element in tableware, with bowls sometimes coming a close second in some markets, especially in Asia. Today, the art of designing and producing plates on a large scale is a highly complex business.

Developments in technology

and manufacturing, changes in dining and the culinary arts, as well as general trends in society have led to many new themes and ideas for what the perfect plate might be.

Speaking as a product designer, to design a successful new plate shape for factory production is a real challenge. The first design challenge? Well, so many different plates in all shapes and sizes are readily available

can tick all these boxes you should be well prepared to start working on your new perfect plate design!

### The material

There are many different ceramic materials available, each with their own advantages and disadvantages. Bone china, porcelain, stoneware, vitreous ceramic, earthenware, glass-ceramic. Bone china and porcelain are

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worldwide. How do you create something new that is different and better than what already exists, and that will also have commercial appeal? The second challenge is to know all the manufacturing processes that will be used to make the plate and to understand (in detail) the respective advantages and limitations of each process. This comes with experience. The third challenge is to know the market well, understand trends in food presentation and cuisine, and the differing requirements of retail and hospitality markets. Once you

white bodies; stoneware, earthenware and vitreous have a natural beige tint. The white body materials traditionally tend to show their pure white colour as part of the overall plate decoration with decals or direct printing, although more recently stoneware-type reactive and coloured glazes are also being used by some manufacturers on porcelain. Stoneware, earthenware and vitreous bodies are usually decorated by coloured glazes that are often paired with special effects such as reactive, speckle, crackle, etc. All these materials can be decorated with colours and patterns in an infinite of ways to complement the whole





gamut of food presentation.

The design of a new plate for factory production is initially a creative process, usually starting with exploratory sketch ideas, progressing through an often-lengthy phase of painstaking design development and refinement, then finally, technical development of the design into fully detailed 2D engineering drawings and 3D CAD models. This precise and detailed engineering work is needed by most factories to enable the manufacture of the plate moulds and tools for the production process. My education in design at the Royal College of Art in London was a master's degree in industrial design, and this creative course with a technical component has proved invaluable in terms of

the engineering aspects needed for working with factories with large-scale ceramic production.

**Creative thinking**

Moving to the more subjective and creative side – what are the best plate shapes?

Much depends on the context of use. There are no definitive guidelines, other than plate shapes should be practical and functional, attractive and preferably durable.

A round coupe plate is the simplest shape for a plate and very popular nowadays, especially in retail. It provides a completely open surface area with no borders, so gives maximum flexibility in the presentation of food. Coupe plates can come in many forms and with different design

details. I use coupe plates at home for the flexibility they offer.

Plates with rims were the most popular shape in retail for many years and continue to have a strong presence. The rim acts as a visual frame, enhancing the appearance of the food contents and as a border to retain the food securely. Rims can come in many different styles that give the plate its character and are widely used in the HoReCa market, especially for banqueting.

Other popular shapes that have been around for some time now are oval plates and platters, square and rectangular forms and more recently, freeform styles. The increasing appreciation by people of craft and hand-made artefacts has led to a great variety of asymmetric and

irregular plate shapes, sometimes with deliberate imperfections, even for large-scale production in factories. Technical advances in manufacturing and robotics have made this possible.

**Anything goes!**

Chefs and food TV programmes have had a big influence too. Most chefs like to choose the pieces to present their culinary art to best advantage, and often will choose individual items from various different companies. A whole world exists for plate decoration possibilities and there are no rules. The chef is king – there is room for everyone.

I love this world of tableware and enjoy the challenge in a crowded market of designing something unique and special and timeless. Ceramic plates look simple but the design process is actually pretty technical, as well as creative. Often it is the fine details that make all the difference. This is especially true in the case of my new design ÚNICO for Mesa Ceramics. As the legendary 1950s furniture designer Charles Eames said; "The details are not the details, they make the design."



**One for the chefs?**

If you are looking for modern, high-quality chef's plates to present your creations in the right light, the Chef's Collection from Fortessa may be up your street. Modern colours, a special three dimensional feel and an unusual design come together in one collection. The extravagant seaweed, meadow and garland patterns in the trendy colors dark grey, taupe, mustard yellow and muted blue bring vibrancy to the table and ensure your masterpieces make the perfect appearance. These plates can be used either as show plates or as chargers.



**Plate power!**

**Josh Rammell**, marketing manager at Utopia Tableware, gives his view on powerful plates

**In your opinion, is the coupe now the most popular plate shape?**

The popularity of the coupe plate has definitely increased in recent years. The combination of a sleek profile and rimless design allows it to be used in a variety of modern dining settings. Not only can it create an appealing presentation for a variety of cuisines, it is equally at home in both casual and fine dining contexts. While plate preferences are very subjective and can be influenced by wider cultural and regional trends, the coupe plate is undoubtedly one of the most common and in-demand types of tableware and certainly holds a significant place in the market.

**What is the optimum plate diameter?**

The bestselling diameter of plate across all Utopia's ranges is between 26 and 28cm. This is where most restaurants aim for with their main dishes, as it provides a generous amount of room to create dramatic and visually pleasing presentations. It can also work for small shared serves or large sides.

**Which material showcases food better – porcelain or stoneware?**

Fundamentally the choice between porcelain or stoneware depends on the aesthetic the restaurant is aiming for, and whatever they pick should align with their overall theme and culinary style.

While porcelain offers slightly more durability and provides a classic plating for a range of dishes, stoneware has an appealing tactile quality that can help to enhance and reinforce certain types of presentation, particularly ones aiming for a more natural or authentic aesthetic. Both porcelain and stoneware have their place, and can be combined to create individual and dramatic serves. Mixing and matching different styles and materials to create the ideal presentation for your business is an increasingly popular choice.

