

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT

From *Country Living*
a monthly magz.

~~Feb 1988~~ Feb-1988
~~Dec 1987~~

Fiesta
WARE

Collectors covet the colorful ceramics of the 1930s and '40s. But are these products, sometimes glazed with a radioactive compound, safe for table use? *Country Living* asked the experts.

Fiesta ware has enjoyed varying degrees of popularity since making a colorful burst into the tableware market in the 1930s. Its recent resurgence as a highly sought collector's item has brought with it concerns about the dinnerware's safety.

Orange-red Fiesta ware, as well as some black- and yellow-colored ceramics produced under other brand names before the Second World War and during the 1960s, was made with color glazes containing uranium oxide, a radioactive compound.

In the 1970s, the Food and Drug Administration began to receive inquiries about possible radioactive emissions from uranium-glazed ceramics, and the FDA's Bureau of Radiological Health analyzed samples of Fiesta ware in 1977. Regarding the radioactivity as an indirect additive into the food supply, the FDA determined that radiation exposure resulting from the use of uranium-glazed ceramics is "unnecessary and therefore avoidable," said Paula Fairfield, consumer affairs officer for the FDA in Boston.

In accordance with the FDA's conclusions, the New York State Department of Health (NYSDH), in Albany, recommends that pieces colored with uranium glazes be reserved strictly for decorative purposes and that they not be used for food service. "Dermal contact, the actual handling of the pottery, does not pose the concern that ingestion of uranium does," said Faith Schottenfeld, NYSDH spokesperson. The NYSDH Bureau of Environmental Radiation Protection recently reported

that uranium-glazed ceramics that appear to be perfect may have tiny cracks or a glaze that has become worn from excessive contact with highly acidic foods. These conditions allow uranium to leach out of the pottery. However, the FDA's 1977 tests specified that the level of leached uranium was not considered a health hazard.

The Homer Laughlin Co., manufacturer of the original 1936 Fiesta ware line (which then included blue, green, yellow, and orange-red colors), and other ceramics compa-

red pieces," Franke said. Moreover, because licensure to use uranium required frequent inspections of Laughlin's Newell, W. Va., plant to protect workers against accidental exposure, Franke acknowledged that the red "just became a hassle to make."

Uranium-glazed ceramics are considered less of a threat to public health than lead-glazed pieces, according to Schottenfeld, but the Nuclear Regulatory Commission nonetheless banned the use of uranium glazes in 1971. "Although the radiation dose is not really quantifiable, uranium glazes were banned because the pottery constantly came into contact with food. It was determined that it was prudent not to use the existing uranium-glazed pottery for eating," said Schottenfeld.

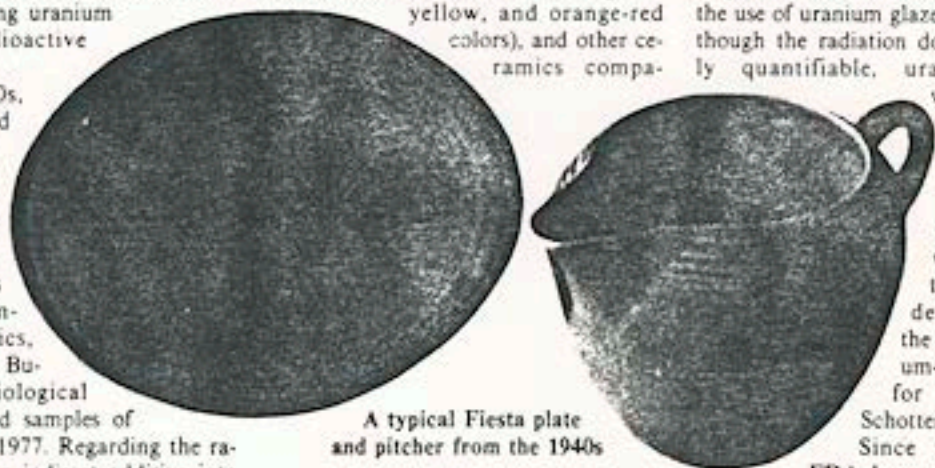
Since the ban, the FDA knows of no American manufacturer producing uranium-glazed wares. Neither the FDA, NYSDH, nor the Homer Laughlin Co. has received any reports of illness resulting from the use or display of uranium-glazed ceramics.

Cobalt blue, black, white, rose, and apricot Fiesta ware went on the market in 1986, and Franke says the new Fiesta glazes are "totally unrelated to the old red glaze."

The FDA lists the following companies as also having used uranium glazes in the 1930s: Caliente, Early California, Edwin M. Knowles, Franciscan, Harlequin, Poppytrail, Stangl, and Vistosa.

For more information, consult your local or state health department.

—Carolyn B. Noye



A typical Fiesta plate and pitcher from the 1940s

nies using uranium glazes were monitored by the Atomic Energy Commission (now the Nuclear Regulatory Commission). Orange-red Fiesta ware was produced until the early 1940s, when the United States' uranium supply was concentrated into the war effort. Fiesta ware's orange-red was reintroduced in the late 1950s.

According to Homer Laughlin's chief ceramics engineer, Ralph Franke, the red was ultimately discontinued—along with the three other original Fiesta colors—when demand declined: The public opted for pastel hues over the strong, dark colors that had made the first Fiesta line so popular. "There was also a lot of misinformation going around about the use of uranium in the