

Keeping it Irish

by R. E. Doucet
photographs by Bradford Ross



This winter my editor gave me a pleasant assignment: to interview entrepreneur Ann Mullan-Karakatsanis, the creator and designer of Aranware®, pottery inspired by Aran Irish traditional sweaters with patterns that seem to reflect elements of Celtic art. The pottery's name is derived from the Gaelic word *cara* (friend) and the beginning of her last name.



Ann Mullan-Karakatsanis

Over a cup of tea and Irish biscuits we met at the editor's home in Scotland, Connecticut. Ann is from Derry, Northern Ireland, and now makes her home near Boston. This truly remarkable woman has entered the arena of competition against much larger entities in the tableware business. Ann gained confidence after spending time with the Development of Entrepreneurs in Boston for Ireland (DEBI) at Boston College, following an education in art, mathematics, history, and business in Liverpool and Stoke-on-Trent. She was

impressed with the American "can do" attitude, which would eventually provide motivation to develop a new pottery line reflecting her Irish heritage.

Ann returned to Ireland, and was hired by Ulster Ceramics in Derry. I found it intriguing that many of the early Irish-Americans sailed from her hometown.

Perhaps it was the complex, mathematically-based interlacings and knots visible in an Aran sweater that drew the young woman to create and design Aranware® in 1996. The concepts were put on paper, and within months she had contracted with her former employer to implement a design of embossment of Aran Isles stitch patterns on ovenware



pottery. The celebrated stitches symbolize Irish life—the link represents the eternal connection with those who left the homestead, the basket for abundant catches from the sea and a bountiful table, the cable for good luck and safety, and the diamond for success.

Writer Vanessa Hughes of *The Sun*, Lowell, Massachusetts, reported that Ann first had to convince the Derry factory—which had never made embossed pottery—that it was possible using existing equipment. Then came an even more daunting task: persuading the only other Irish pottery, Carrigaline Pottery in County Cork in the Catholic South, to make the products and cooperate with the factory in the Protestant North. Derry, however, is predominantly Catholic and the home of the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland. In the next few years Mullan-Karakatsanis shuttled between Ireland and America, developing her business.

What I admire most about Ann is her intent to keep Aranware® all Irish. Resisting offers to have the collection manufactured more cheaply in other countries, her mission is to create an export market for products

manufactured in Northern Ireland that will provide an ongoing source of jobs and create confidence within the community. Many of the workers at Ulster Ceramics had gone to school with the designer and visited the factory when they were young students.



Ann felt that the shamrock was an overused symbol and that Aran designs were an equally powerful emblem of Ireland. The cable stitch trimmed every piece, unifying the collection. A teapot, cup and saucer, and jug were soon added to the Aranware® line. The teapot and jug have the honeycomb stitch, signifying hard work; the cup has the double zig-zag, representing the ups

and downs of married life; and the saucer is embellished with the link stitch, which also appears on the pie plate. The neutral cream color lends itself to mixing and matching with other tableware settings.

She speaks about the manufacturing end of Kara Irish Pottery with passion, considering herself more of a businesswoman than an artist. Speaking in potter's terms about *jolly* and *cast*, she elaborated on the eleven steps necessary to make a teapot. Ann is in the process of designing new pieces to add to the current line—a sugar bowl and creamer will soon make their debut, followed by a mug.

It was nearly 100 years ago that the "Aran stitches" were born. Now they have come full circle—from Boston to Ireland and back to Boston again, but this time in a beautiful line of pottery designed by Irish-born Ann Mullan-Karakatsanis. Aranware® is sold in over 30 states across America.



The honeycomb cable, drawn on the above teapot, looks exactly like its name and is considered symbolic of hard work bringing its just reward; as the work of the busy bee produces the golden honey.



The true story of Aran knitting was discovered by knitwear designer Rohana Darlington while in Aran during the summer of 1984. She searched for Mary Durrane, said by the islanders to know more about knitting than anyone else. Mary told her the tale of when her mother, Margaret, and her friend Maggie O'Toole had gone to Boston, Massachusetts, in 1906 with the intention of emigrating. They stayed on "some islands off Boston" and learned from some "foreign migrant woman" how to do cable, moss stitch, and trellis or lattice patterns. In 1908 they returned to Ireland, blending their new knitting skills with what they saw sailors wearing, and experimenting with patterns.



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