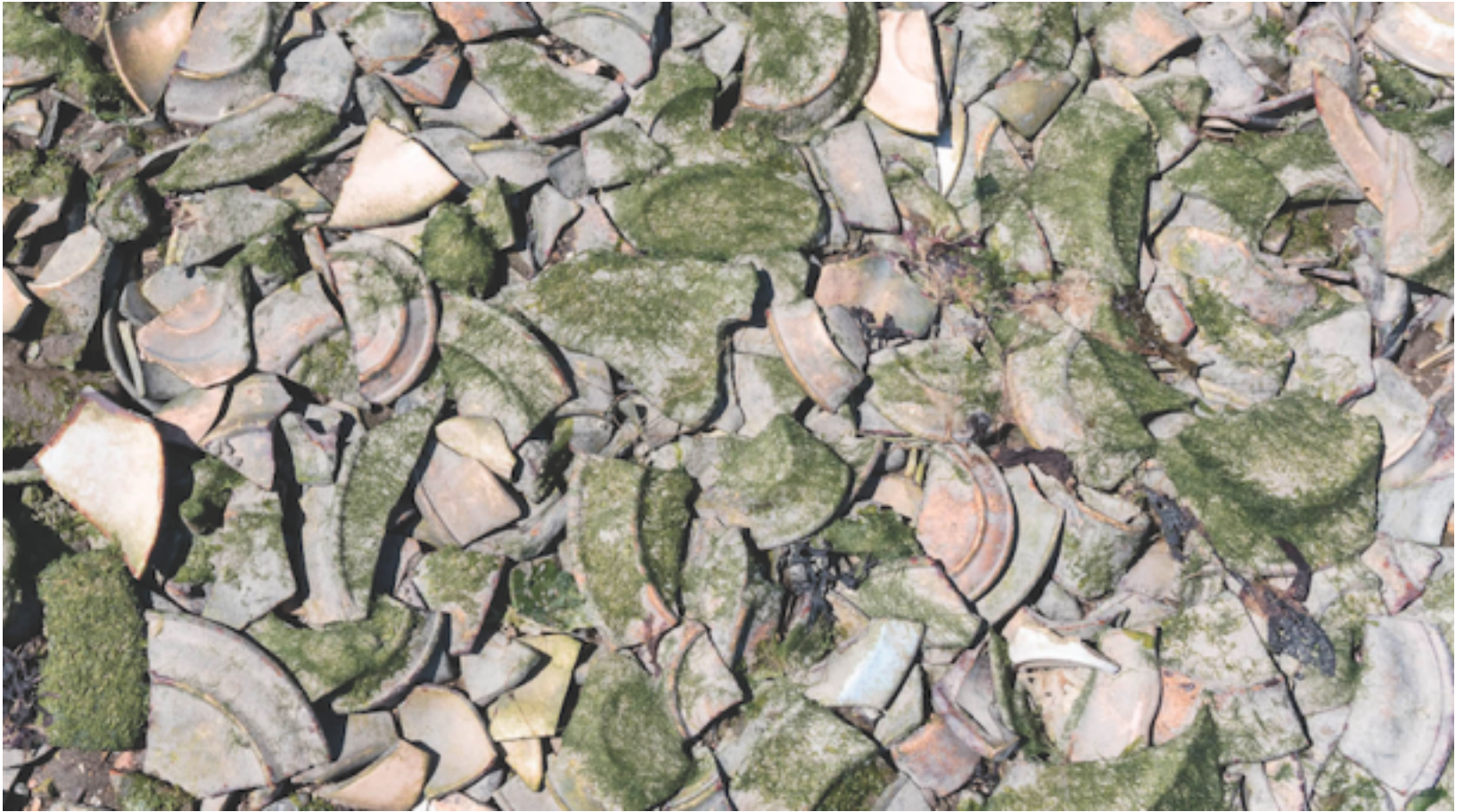


The Beach of Dinner Parties Past



Most people comb the beach for shells or, if they're really looking to strike it rich, rare coins, sand-caked cell phones, or even a dropped engagement ring. But at one East Bay beach, design-minded hunters have been scouring the sand for ceramic treasures.

Welcome to Tepco Beach, a small patch of the Richmond shoreline covered with shards of porcelain dishes made by the now defunct Tepco (Technical Porcelain and China Ware Company) factory. From around 1930 to 1968, Tepco made dishes for much of the Bay Area. Iconic San Francisco restaurants including the Doggie Diner, Trader Vic's, and Spenger's commissioned Tepco to design and glaze custom plates, cups, saucers, and creamers; even the navy used Tepco dishes in its mess halls and on ships that were docked in Richmond's Kaiser Shipyards during the Second World War. Tepco dumped its broken dishes at the edge of the bay near Point Isabel, an environmentally unfriendly practice that went relatively unnoticed until curious visitors to the point started poking around the shoreline.

On a recent day at Tepco Beach, Richmond artist Tina Amidon searched for

shards for her next project: a kitchen backsplash of colorful Tepco pieces. In 2011, she created a coffee-cup-shaped love seat covered in Tepco fragments. “When you see a Tepco dish, it pulls you back to a moment in time,” she says.

Tepco was founded by John Pagliero, whose family came from the Piedmont countryside north of Turin, Italy, to El Cerrito and began making porcelain toilets and sinks. When the factory opened around 1930, it quickly became a community fixture, says Tom Panas, a board member of the El Cerrito Historical Society. To this day, Panas estimates, Tepco remains the largest employer El Cerrito has ever had.

Amidon crouched down and dusted sand off a broken baby-pink teacup handle and half of a white-and-green-striped saucer. She pocketed a couple of new pieces for her backsplash project—guaranteeing Tepco pride of place in the kitchen once again.

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SECRET SPOT

The Beach of Dinner Parties Past

A mid-century porcelain factory used to dump discarded dishes on the Richmond shoreline—where collectors now dig for tabletop treasures. BY ARIEL PLOTNICK

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