

Decor Maine

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LIVING BEAUTIFULLY IN MAINE

THE LANDSCAPE ISSUE

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to the ultimate
OUTDOOR RETREAT

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DOURO brings a
PIECE OF PORTUGAL
to Portland's
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business is blooming

A large, vibrant bouquet of flowers in a glass vase on a wooden table. The bouquet includes a variety of flowers such as dahlias, roses, chrysanthemums, and purple flowers. The vase is placed on a dark wooden table with a decorative pedestal. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

FOR CERAMICIST FRANCES PALMER, HER GARDEN
IS A PERENNIAL INSPIRATION

written by **ALLISON PAIGE**

Celebrated for her elegant handmade ceramics, self-taught potter Frances Palmer blends classical influence with a distinctly modern sensibility. The New Jersey native originally studied art history at Columbia University and worked as a printmaker. It was only after the birth of her daughter and a move from New York City to Connecticut in 1987, that she decided to try her hand, quite literally, at making pottery.

"I didn't start it by happenstance," Frances explains. "I was trying to figure out something I could do from home and be home with my children and earn money and make things."

Her work quickly became sought after, selling in high-end department stores like Barneys New York and Takashimaya, and glowingly profiled in *Vogue*, *Architectural Digest*, and *The New York Times*. "I started it as a vocation," she continues. "It's not like I did it and then thought, 'Oh, I think I'll earn a living this way.' I wanted to earn a living, so I had to learn."

The rest is history. Again, quite literally, as Frances draws inspiration from the past—from the eclectic work of 19th century ceramist George Ohr, the self-dubbed "Mad Potter of Biloxi," to Charleston in Sussex, England, the Arts-and-Crafts-bedecked home of the artist Vanessa Bell. Harkening back further, she creates bespoke pieces that reference Etruscan, Cycladic, and Roman vessels, crafting pottery that evokes the familiar shapes of antiquity updated with her fresh, contemporary touch. Nearly 40 years on, Frances is a multi-hyphenate artist and entrepreneur: potter, photographer, gardener, and author, not to mention an accomplished home chef and gracious entertainer. One senses Frances's hand in everything she does, from the first turn of the wheel to the unfurling of a bloom, to the click of a shutter.

"I don't know if I'm gifted," she demurs, "but I have always made work with my hands, so I felt that I was able to kind of get the hang of it rather quickly. But as with anything, you just have to do it over and over and over again."

In the light-filled studio in the barn adjacent to her colonial-era home, she works with porcelain, terracotta, stoneware and earthenware, producing everything from cake stands, platters, and mugs, to her sculptural vases—incorporating delicate, expressive details like fluted edges, scalloped rims, and beading. Each piece is thrown, trimmed, and glazed by her. "I do all the work myself," she notes.

"Nobody helps." Her hallmark is the subtle, asymmetrical quirks she preserves, charming idiosyncrasies that are tangible proof of her handiwork. "I don't believe in perfection," she insists, "but I do believe in perseverance."

Although her work has an improvisational, sometimes fanciful appearance, the process requires precise, swift reactions. "It's meditative," Frances says, "but it's planned. In my sketchbooks, every time I make a piece, I make a note of the measurements and the weights so I can keep track of what I'm doing. But it's really fun. It's just fun to make work. I do it every day. I'm doing it as we speak!"

Just outside her studio, Frances planted two cutting gardens, (one occupies a former tennis court) which she maintains with the same rigorous attention she gives her pottery. "I originally started the gardens to grow dahlias," she says, naming her pet favorite, "but many years on I grow so many different things besides just the dahlias." She also raises bees, ensuring that her flowers have plenty of help proliferating. "I love having the bees," she says. "I have four hives. They're great. There are some gardeners that don't want honeybees because they don't want to take away from the native bees, but I have so many native bees. There's room for everyone."

Full of heady, whimsical bloomers—bearded irises, starry-petaled dahlias, hearty sunflowers, and bright zinnias—the garden feels like a lush escape. "When it's blooming, I go out there several times a day. Obviously if it's winter, I'm not going out there!" she says with a laugh. "I put in a greenhouse in 2019 and that's a huge help for getting me through the winter. I have lots of geraniums and citrus trees and orchids. I do usually have something blooming even if I can't go outside."

Once a vase is fired and complete, Frances expertly arranges a bouquet to complement both its elegance and utility, then photographs it. Moody images of the delicate vessels brimming with blooms feature regularly on her Instagram account and have been likened to the still-life paintings of Old Masters. "It's definitely a collaboration between the pots and the flowers," says Frances. She explores and celebrates the symbiotic relationship between her pottery, garden, and photography in her most recent book, *Life with Flowers: Inspiration and Lessons from the Garden*.

From the flowers she grows, to the bees she raises to pollinate them, Frances has created an ecosystem that acts as a well-spring of inspiration. During the warm months, a day in the studio is rarely complete without a garden stroll where Frances may cut specimens to arrange in her vases or simply observe the bountiful blooms. Though ephemeral, their beauty, much like her pottery, is timeless. ■



Frances's evocative photographs of her pottery and lush homegrown arrangements have been likened to the still life paintings of Old Masters. **OPENING PAGE:** Every piece is one-of-a-kind, with charming asymmetries purposefully preserved, a hallmark of Frances's handiwork.

An assemblage of ash-and-shino-glazed, wood-fired porcelain, including tulipieres, are paired with parrot-head tulips and grape hyacinth. **OPPOSITE:** Earthy terracotta vessels ground a presentation of showy dahlias, lilies, and zinnia.

