

Susan Gravely on the lunch plate that built Vietri

Posted on November 15, 2026 by Sabina Castelfranco

CHAPEL HILL, North Carolina — On a hotel terrace on the Amalfi Coast in 1983, Susan Gravely fell in love with a lunch plate painted with fish, animals, and flowers. The next day she, her sister Frances, and their mother Lee were knocking on a factory door in Vietri sul Mare.

That plate became Vietri, now America's largest importer of Italian ceramics, sold in more than 2,500 stores across all 50 states. After four decades selling through other people's shops, the company opened its first flagship store on October 17 in Chapel Hill, where it began in a room of Frances's house.

A new hospitality line is also putting Italian stoneware on hotel and restaurant tables, a fitting turn for a company born over a hotel lunch.

Q. What was on that plate?

"We were staying at a beautiful hotel called Il San Pietro. Imagine peach-colored tablecloths, a crystal blue sea, and animals, fish, and flowers in many colors all over the plates. I looked down and fell in love for the first time. It was about plates."

Source: https://italynow.co.uk/susan-gravely-on-the-lunch-plate-that-built-vietri/



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Selection of Vietri plates (*Credits: Vietri*)

Q. The name honors the town. What else does it mean?

“We were driving back from the factory, joking about starting a company. My pragmatic and worldly mother said that if we reversed the syllables, in Italian it would be tre vite, three lives. You, Frances, and me. I said it was perfect.”

Q. Why a flagship store now, and why Chapel Hill?

“It was time to create an environment where we could show everything we do and get feedback from our customers. We started in Frances’s house, then an apartment because we couldn’t afford a warehouse, then Hillsborough. So we’re back in our beloved Chapel Hill.”

Q. Which pieces can’t you wait for people to discover?

“One is Ortigia, from Sicily, inspired by the tapestries of the Palazzo dei Normanni, on everything from perfumes to handbags. The other is the art of Roberto and Rodolfo Guarneri, whose gallery is on the Arno in Florence.”

Q. How do you make hand-painted ceramics tough enough for a restaurant kitchen?

“Italy is not known for its stoneware. We researched the process with three factories and created an Italian stoneware that is highly glazed and highly fired, strong enough for any restaurant in the world. We paired it with Paper Soft napkins, which feel like linen but are paper.”

Q. “Italy on a Plate” marked your 40th anniversary, followed by “Italy in a Glass” and now “Italy on a Coast.” What are these books about?

“They are my world of memories, of people and of the simple, delicious foods of Italy. We go to each person’s home, and they give us their own recipes.”

Q. Someone is eating lunch off a plain white plate right now. Convince them to change.

“Think about what colors you love and what designs or symbols are important in your life, and create dinnerware that can be handed down from generation to generation.”

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