

Tile Me Pretty

A Nashville designer expands her showroom—and its repertoire of offerings—with a bigger space and a new, budget-friendly artisan line.

BY KRISTIN LUNA

You needn't look far to see examples of Mary Elizabeth Oropeza's handiwork: Her patterns seem to live in every Nashville home, whether as the foundation for a sleek bathroom remodel or the backsplash of a modern kitchen.

The owner of Mission Stone & Tile fell into the industry by accident, she says; after completing her interior design degree at Auburn University, she moved to Nashville and worked at Bradford Interiors for a year and a half before landing a job doing purchasing for an Austin-based company that imported granite and marble slabs.

"I added a very small tile line for that company, and I saw a need for affordable, aesthetic luxury tile. That was the premise: to have a luxury tile boutique that's affordable," she says of her decision to open Mission Stone & Tile in 2006 and a second location in her hometown, Chattanooga, two years back. "To accomplish that, we had to go direct and import containers of things, bring them here and have them in stock for immediate gratification. That's how we started and we grew into lots of other products, designing our own, and distributing them on a national level."

Oropeza moved into her current space on Sidco Drive in 2008, which she had been leasing but purchased earlier this year, enabling her to significantly expand the showroom with even more dramatic installations. She also recently debuted The Essentials, a collection of tiles with 80 different skews that comes in seven colors and five textures, from honeycomb to pinstripe, and—best of all—is easy on the wallet.

Mission Stone & Tile had already gained national attention after Oropeza's Beveled Arabesque design went viral six years prior, and she was looking to add even more product offerings that were exclusive to her showroom. The idea for The Essentials came to her on a weekend shopping trip when she stumbled upon a set of small chafing dishes that had textures pressed into the exterior of the bowls.



Mary Elizabeth Oropeza



LESLEE MITCHELL, ALYSSA ROSENHECK, SUPPLIED

"I had already been brainstorming the idea of an affordable artisan line. We were offering Beveled Arabesque, but we needed something that could be used in a variety of installations, beyond the backsplash," she says. "The moment I saw the textured bowls, I was immediately inspired. I snatched them up, shipped them to our factory, and requested that they be made into small tiles."

Oropeza's goal with The Essentials was no small task: She aimed to create an affordable, unusual subway tile that promised a bold, unique statement while still being cost-efficient.

"Subway tile can be used in so many different applications, but I had never seen it with the textures pressed into the surface," she says. "The fact that it's hand-glazed and handcrafted gives it the artisan appeal."

Mission Stone & Tile's products come from all over the world; The Essentials line, for example, is made in Mexico where handcrafted ceramics are a major focus. The longest part of building such a business and debuting a new line, Oropeza says, is establishing relationships with such suppliers around the world and perfecting the samples, a process that can take up to two years. She has several additional collections that she anticipates debuting in the next six months, too; one such design she's particularly excited about is a new product out of Japan that she plans to unveil in 2016.

"I've never worked in Japan before, and their glazing is really awesome. They're really creating art there," she says. "I realized if we can continue to have products that are just us, we can create exposure across the country. We're really moving toward that concept as we add more and more lines to our collection." (*Mission Stone & Tile, 2930 Sidco Dr., 615-244-6448; missionstonetile.com*)



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