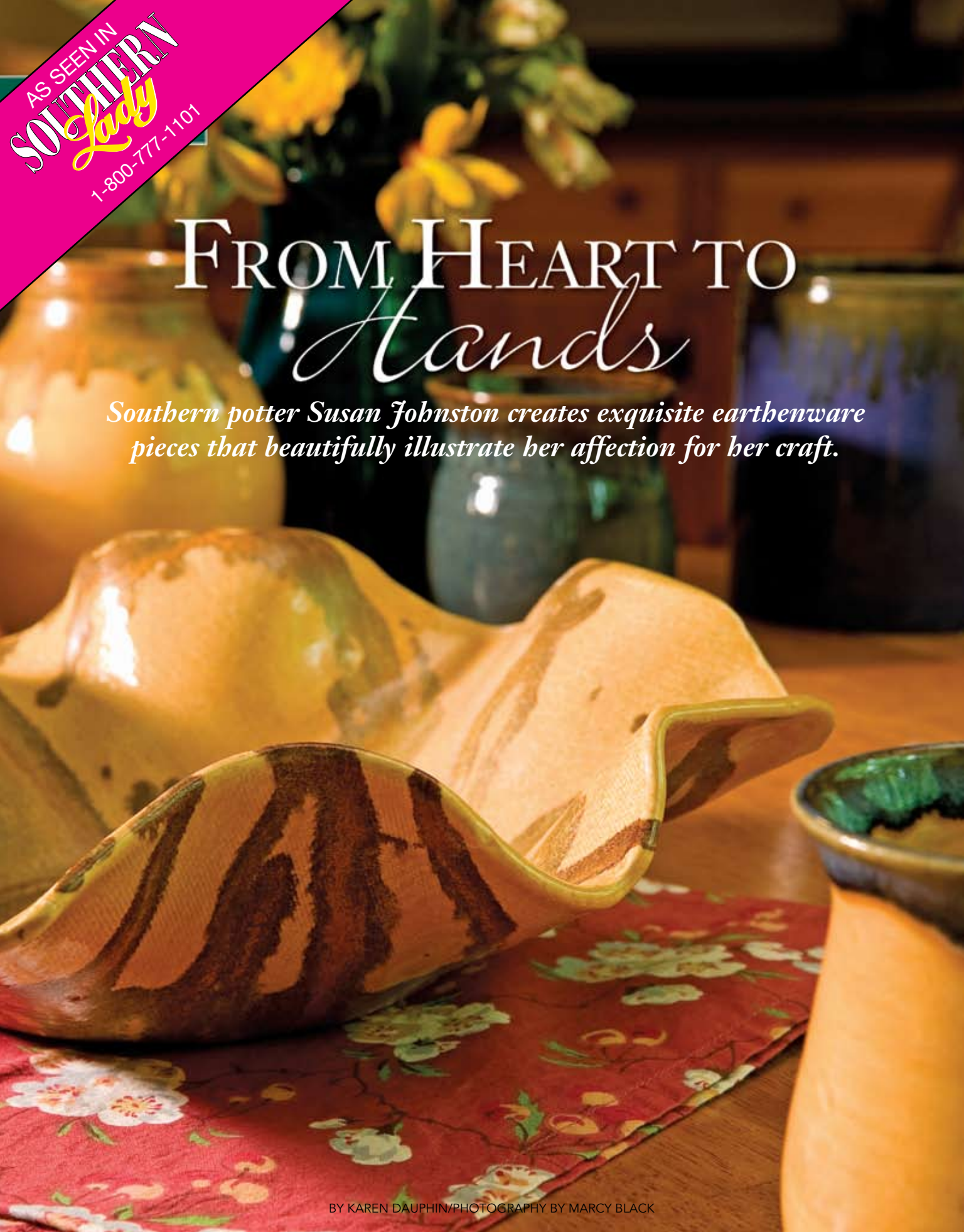


# FROM HEART TO *Hands*

*Southern potter Susan Johnston creates exquisite earthenware pieces that beautifully illustrate her affection for her craft.*



BY KAREN DAUPHIN/PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARCY BLACK



The soft whirring of a potter's wheel is the soothing background music in Susan Johnston's home studio in Vestavia Hills, Alabama. With her loyal chocolate lab, Jake, at her feet, she settles into her morning routine of "throwing," her favorite part of producing the pottery that bears her name. What begins as a simple clump of clay becomes a mug, vase, pitcher, or something else beautiful in Susan's talented hands.

Susan discovered pottery making at age 12 while growing up in Dunwoody, Georgia. She took a class at the North Arts Center and was immediately smitten. When other girls were receiving CDs and makeup for birthday and Christmas presents, Susan was happily opening a kick wheel and other tools of the trade. Except for taking a few classes and a workshop by noted potter Robin Hopper, Susan is self-taught. She developed her skills through years of practice and experimentation with clay and glazes.

On a typical day, Susan will spend the morning throwing, reserving the afternoon for attaching handles and glazing pottery. The process requires great patience; it takes about two weeks to take a piece from start to finish. Thrown pottery must sit and dry until all the water has evaporated—"or it will explode in the kiln," Susan says with a grin—which takes about a week. Then it is fired in the kiln for the first time, baking in the intense heat for just over 12 hours. Glazes are applied, and the piece returns to the kiln for a second time. The kiln cannot be opened until it has cooled down, a process that takes about 24 hours. Though it is a lengthy process, Susan and her husband, Brice, never tire of the wait. "It's really like Christmas morning when we open the kiln and see how the pieces turned out," says Susan.

There is a bit of mystery and more than a little magic involved in pottery making, as well as a healthy dose of

Sunlight illuminates Susan Johnston happily throwing clay in her studio. To bring the artist's pretty and practical pottery into your own home, visit [www.susanjohnstonpottery.com](http://www.susanjohnstonpottery.com).

science. Susan mixes all of the glazes she uses from raw chemicals that come in powdered form and blend with water. A check of her inventory reveals names usually seen in a chemistry lab. Testing glazes is a tedious task, but one that Susan embraces with enthusiasm; she has tested over 50 glazes to date.

As aesthetically pleasing as Susan's pottery is, it's equally important to her that the pieces are functional. Every item is dishwasher-, microwave-, and oven-safe. Says Susan, "It's the biggest form of flattery to me when people actually use my pottery." And the pieces just beg to be used. Her mugs are the ideal size and shape to hold steaming cocoa on a brisk fall morning, and her vases make perfect containers for bunches of autumn mums. Susan offers serving pieces, like chip-and-dip and brie dishes, that will have guests green with envy. No worries—Susan continues to turn out her pottery that is available through her website and in Birmingham-area stores A'Mano and Wrapsody.

Though her business is growing by leaps and bounds, the idea of mass commercial production doesn't appeal to Susan. "I want to keep my work my own and original," she says intently. "I like to know who has my pieces and what they are using them for." With that said, Susan slips her long blond hair into a ponytail and heads back to her wheel to create the wonderful pottery that illustrates the talent and dedication of this sweet-spirited artisan. ♡