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**FROM LEFT** Naomi Neilson Howard, seated near hand-hammered copper tubs, is the founder of the kitchen, bath, and home furnishings business Native Trails. The copper Avila sink has a nickel finish. Trimmed with the hand-formed nails called clavos, the Coronado range hood is fitted with state-of-the-art ventilation.

# NAOMI NEILSON HOWARD

FEW PEOPLE POSSESS the entrepreneurial ability to turn an appreciation for craft into a world-class business like Naomi Neilson Howard. As a young woman who frequently traveled with her family to Mexico, Howard found herself drawn to the artisans she met in village markets. "It was clear they were very talented, but didn't get a lot of respect locally."

**NAOMI  
NEILSON HOWARD**  
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Feeling that these people would find appreciation for their craft if they could connect with a larger world, Naomi began driving solo deep into Mexico while she was still in college; she'd planned her route around centers of pottery, copper, beadwork, silver, and other traditional crafts. "There are hundreds of different towns...I was determined to go to the source and meet the artisans. Sometimes I would get to where they lived and there was nothing to see, because they were used to trekking their wares down the mountain to market."

She often found treasure. Once her van was full,

she'd drive back to southern California, sometimes arriving just before class. She sold her discoveries at local street fairs. Soon she was commissioning such useful items as one-off copper sinks from artisans who had been working with the metal for generations. They sold well, even though copper sinks were only a bit of the market 15 years ago. When Native Trails launched its first line of copper sinks at the National Kitchen & Bath Show in 2003, it was a smashing success: "People were just crowded around our booth. They had never seen anything like it."

Sink sales rose exponentially after that. In the years since, Native Trails has expanded its offerings to include artisan-made kitchen and bath furniture, range hoods, and handcrafted furnishings in copper, wood, and tile, all made with sustainable and often recycled materials. In 2014, the company moved into its own building in San Luis Obispo. Built and finished in concrete, reclaimed wood, and hammered copper, the new space reflects the company's twin values of artisanal and sustainable craftsmanship.

—Mary Ellen Polson



An artisan in Mexico, one of thousands cultivated by Native Trails all over the world, hammers copper by hand.

## FOR ART AND PEOPLE

Native Trails has always been led by a philosophy of respect for the people who make its sinks, vanities, and accessories and for the traditional and sustainable methods they use. "What really drives me is creating beautiful products using ancient techniques that are still beautiful and useful," says Naomi Howard.

Native Trails is eco-conscious, too—always on the hunt for recyclable materials like the copper used in fabricating sinks, or the reclaimed wood in vanities. Every idea for a new kitchen or bath fitting or furnishing goes through a filter: If the item is not made using renewable materials by a sustainable process, the concept gets nixed. Plus, "We're always looking for products that have a story behind them," Howard adds. "Something has to really draw us to it."

Turns out, it's a brilliant business model. Recently introduced concrete sinks, made of renewable materials strengthened with hemp, met both criteria. They are sold online, as are many of the company's offerings. "No one had done concrete sinks that could be ordered through a catalog—it's a hit," Howard says.

## RECIPROCAL BENEFIT

A big part of the motivation for Native Trails comes from Naomi Howard's commitment to artisan heritage: providing a market for people whose craft traditions would otherwise disappear. But it's always been a two-way street: her subs have helped her along the way, too. On one trip when Naomi was short of cash, for example, "a copper artisan said, 'take these 20 copper vases and sell them. Pay me next time you're here.' That really struck me."

Native Trails has established working relationships with craftspeople in at least 10 different areas in Mexico, plus locations in Vietnam and India. Many are true cottage or backyard industries, employing a handful of family members and locals. One supplier has grown so successful that its shop covers a couple of town blocks and employs dozens of people.

It's almost impossible for tiny businesses in Mexico, as an example, to borrow money at reasonable rates. Native Trails makes loans strategically and when people need them: "It creates strong relationships with a lot of trust," Howard says.

**LEFT** Trough sinks that accept two taps, like this one in sustainable concrete, make the most of limited bathroom space.

**RIGHT** The Chardonnay vanity from the Vintner's collection is made from reclaimed oak wine barrels from California wineries.

