

COASTERS

rising stars among houseware



Once inconspicuous, they are now the high-design, attention-grabbing divas of the table top. Traditionally, coasters have been like omelettes: beautifully basic, easily elaborated, appreciated by almost everyone, but not particularly

inspiring. That has been the case for as long as people have sought to protect their wood furniture from the destructive forces of condensation. But look again. Coasters are having a moment. Manufacturers are offering myriad options, many offering hundreds of designs including handmade ones.

Coasters can be cardboard, glass, cork, leather, agate, silver, plastic, cotton, ceramic, Corian or petrified wood. And even budget-conscious consumers might set their drinks on expensive stuff like malachite or shagreen because so little material is required to make a coaster, and the designs need not be intricately tooled. The variety of coaster shapes is dazzling with circles, arcs, hexagons. The silhouetted components of a paper cheeseburger (patty, bun, tomato, lettuce), which you stack to make a complete sandwich, or a mirrored square with simulated lines of cocaine are popular.

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There is a huge rise in young, independent makers who are creating things out of their own studios and then putting them on the web to sell. One makes ceramic coasters with colourful, rustic patterns inspired by Finnish design that involves firing the coasters in a kiln and drying them between sheets of moisture-absorbing drywall for two weeks, flipping them every other day to keep them from warping.

Then there are those who bind wood chunks, cords, plastic and other materials together with resin-soaked spandex netting and cutting randomly patterned cross-sections that work nicely as coasters. Thanks to their size and simplicity, coasters are stealthy cultural touchstones. They allude to dramas much more profound than their simple uses may suggest. Sharing equal billing as an influence on the modern coaster, is the *bierdeckel*, or paper beer mat, a late-19th-century German invention that was originally placed on top of a mug to keep stray dirt and insects from falling in. Eventually, the beer mat migrated underneath the mug like the coasters we use today, but its job was to absorb messy liquid that sloshed over the edges of the glass, and, more important, to advertise the name of the beer hall or brew.

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The coaster evolved in the 20th century, because of three developments that made furniture more vulnerable: the growing popularity of aperitifs enjoyed away from the dining room; the availability of ice, giving rise to condensation on glassware; and the exposing of wood surfaces throughout the home. Today, subtle, understated and elegant coasters have the potential to add that all important "wow" factor to any commemorative event whether business or personal, formal or informal. ■ *Source: Home & Garden*