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Shining stars

Buckeye's restored stoves find a place of prominence in kitchens next door and on Hollywood movie sets

darrington@sacbee.com

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STOCKTON – Tom Lawson showed off his latest masterpiece with the pride of a fine craftsman.

"This is a real beauty," he said of the gleaming 600-pound blue, white and silver cast-iron stove. "You should have seen it when we started."

It's another successful revival, brought back from the dead to fully functional kitchen centerpiece.

Lawson's Buckeye Appliance specializes in such comebacks. The Stockton business is one of a handful of vintage and antique stove restorers on the West Coast.

"What I really love is, I'd never seen one like this before," he said. "This was a wonderful challenge, a real puzzle."

A blue lion logo roars on the oven door of the Wetter Stoves & Ranges Sultana model, circa 1915. It's a hybrid; half wood-burning, half gas.

"This was state of the art in its day," Lawson said.

The Wetter was one of many rare and unusual vintage stoves that have benefited from the Buckeye touch.

Old stoves – mostly built since 1930 – are enjoying a renaissance of popularity. The reason is simple.

"They hold up better than the new ones," said Christopher Zajic of Sacramento's Zajic Appliance, which has been repairing stoves for 50 years. "We still do quite a lot of them, usually one or two a week. There are a lot in circulation.

"They were built to last," Zajic added. "You never get 20, 30, 40 years out of a new stove. You'll be lucky to get 15. You've got to admire the ingenuity of those old guys who built these things."

This time of year is the busiest. Cooks preparing for the holidays realize – sometimes at the last minute – that the oven or a burner doesn't work.

"We get calls every year the Wednesday before Thanksgiving," said Josh Lawson, Tom's son. "That's too late, even for us. People get in a panic."

"The biggest problem is people don't keep them clean," he added. "General upkeep will keep them going forever."

Often the problem is simple; a replacement part is needed. The Lawsons have thousands of parts for a century of models. Full restorations cost about \$1,500 and up.

The Lawsons' shop features an array of appliances built before 35-year-old Josh was born. Completed stoves range in price from \$2,000 for a basic late-1950s Wedgewood to the \$12,000 O'Keefe & Merritt Aristocrat, a mammoth cooking machine meant for a mansion. It features six burners, multiple ovens, a broiler, warming drawers and much more.

"It cost \$900 new in the 1930s," Tom Lawson said. "It was always expensive."

Buckeye's restored stoves look good as new. A Buckeye stove is featured in the circa 1955 kitchen scenes of the new film "Revolutionary Road," starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet.

The stoves come in a rainbow of colors from tomato red to cobalt blue. Black, green (mint and forest), aqua and yellow are also popular.

The stoves come with clever touches like Wedgewood's Radiant broiler; the burners are arranged in a loop underneath a reflective plate for more even cooking. Several models have built-in salt and pepper shakers above the range.

Some wood-burning stoves feature a heated water pipe that provides instant boiling water at the turn of a spigot.

"They were just ingenious," Tom said.

For stove and kitchen kitsch lovers, Buckeye Appliance is an eye-popping surprise. Located on a nondescript industrial street leading from Interstate 5 to the Stockton Arena, it's easy to miss.

A small sign marks the large warehouse with a few storefront windows. Rows and rows of stoves line the giant work area where Tom and Josh Lawson and technician Pat DeLacy tackle the makeovers.

"We've got about 135, 150 stoves back here," Tom Lawson said. "I lose count. If you want it, we've probably got it."

Inside the showroom, about 15 fully restored stoves sit among a plethora of vintage kitchen items, matched by appropriate decade or color scheme. It's a shabby chic haven with several variations on "homey."

Darcy Lawson, Tom's wife, put together the kitchen tableaux, crammed with everyday items. Shelves are filled with 1950s mixers. Racks of flowered linen tablecloths stand next to stacks of California-made dishes. An adorable pink porcelain and chrome dining set fits right in with a baby-pink stove.

Recently, the Lawsons branched out into architectural salvage that added walls to the vignettes. Recovered from old homes, many of these items fit right in with the stoves. Why not? They came out of somebody's kitchen.

The salvage side also is stocked with elaborate mantels, windows and other finds that could help with the restoration of a Victorian or a bungalow or add personality to a more modern dwelling.

Opened in 1976, Buckeye Appliance was named for Lawson's native state of Ohio. He's also a huge Ohio State Buckeye fan; the banner in the front window is a tip-off.

About 35 years ago, Lawson started as a Maytag repairman – in his driveway. He and a friend eventually opened a used appliance store and tried to expand to selling new.

"I couldn't compete with Circuit City and the big boys," he lamented. "I had to sell a washer for \$225 when I paid \$195 for it wholesale. I had to find something else."

Lawson gravitated to the kitchen stove. He loved the workmanship and attention to detail put into these steel and porcelain stalwarts. He enjoyed fixing them up.

A typical 40-inch vintage model weighs around 500 pounds. Thinner and more compact, many modern stoves are about 150 pounds.

The choice of stoves often reflected the original owner's geography. So does the search for parts.

Wedgewoods were built in the Bay Area and are common in Northern California. Made in Los Angeles, O'Keefe & Merritt dominated the southland. Midwest classics from Magic Chef hail from St. Louis.

Because of Wedgewood's proximity, those parts are the easiest for Lawson to find. "There were just so many of them up here," he said.

"Lots of people work on 1950s or '60s stoves, but I think we're the only ones around here that will tackle anything," he added. "We've worked on stoves over a hundred years old. We'll look at anything. I love seeing something I've never seen before and bringing it back to life."

Call The Bee's Debbie Arrington, (916) 321-1075.