

Painting the Town

**Artists by design,
the two founders
of Yolo Colorhouse
have become
businesswomen
by necessity**





LOOKING FOR A RECIPE FOR SUCCESS? Try taking equal parts of the color flair and creativity of artists Virginia Young and Janie Lowe, add a healthy dollop of solid business sense, and you end up with Yolo Colorhouse.

In less than one year, the Portland-based company founded by Lowe and Young hit the ground running with its debut of a 40-color palette of environmentally friendly interior paint and hasn't slowed since.

And Young and Lowe still feel more than a little dazed when they talk about the fast ride they've embarked upon.

Not dazed enough, however, to let slip actual dollar figures regarding revenue from Yolo's paint line, The Earth's Color Collection. They prefer, instead, to say that the monthly sales of about 750 gallons of paint are ahead of both their expectations and those of Rodda Paint, which is manufacturing and distributing Yolo Colorhouse's products.

And even though Young and Lowe hold tight to their artistic versions of themselves – they are, they say, genuine “color nerds” – they've become business-savvy enough to make mention of the fact that Rodda has expanded the number of its stores carrying the paint, adding Yolo products to locations in Seattle and Vancouver, Wash.

It's a business sense they've worked hard to cultivate. Lowe was working as a freelance illustrator and Young was focused on graphics in her job as an art director in the advertising field when the two decided to join forces 10 year ago. Taking letters from each of their last names, they opened Yolo Paint and began offering custom interior finishing services.

Before too long, however, they began to wonder if the paints they were using – most of which gave off strong fumes – would eventually affect their health.

In a search for alternatives, Young and Lowe began digging into the past, turning up recipes from the days before factory-manufactured paint was common: milk paints, shellacs. They even headed to the hills, armed with shovels, unearthing clays from around Oregon, which they turned into plasters in a range of natural, earthy tones.

At the same time, they noticed a growing local interest in the areas of sustainability, and a corresponding call for paints without volatile organic compounds, the very synthetic ingredients that had caused Young and Lowe to begin seeking more natural paint alternatives.

Young and Lowe, however, knew they weren't paint manufacturers. They weren't even interested in become so.

“Really, what our specialty is, is color,” Young says.

So they began investigating companies that specialized in manufacturing and distributing paint, eventually settling on Northwest-based Rodda.

Before they contacted Rodda, however, the budding entrepreneurs headed to the Small Business Development Center, run by the Portland office of the Small Business Administration, where they found Jackie Babicky.

“We went there with ideas we wanted to do,” Young says. “We were all over the board.”

With Babicky's assistance, Young and Lowe began to create order from a jumble of goals and ideas.

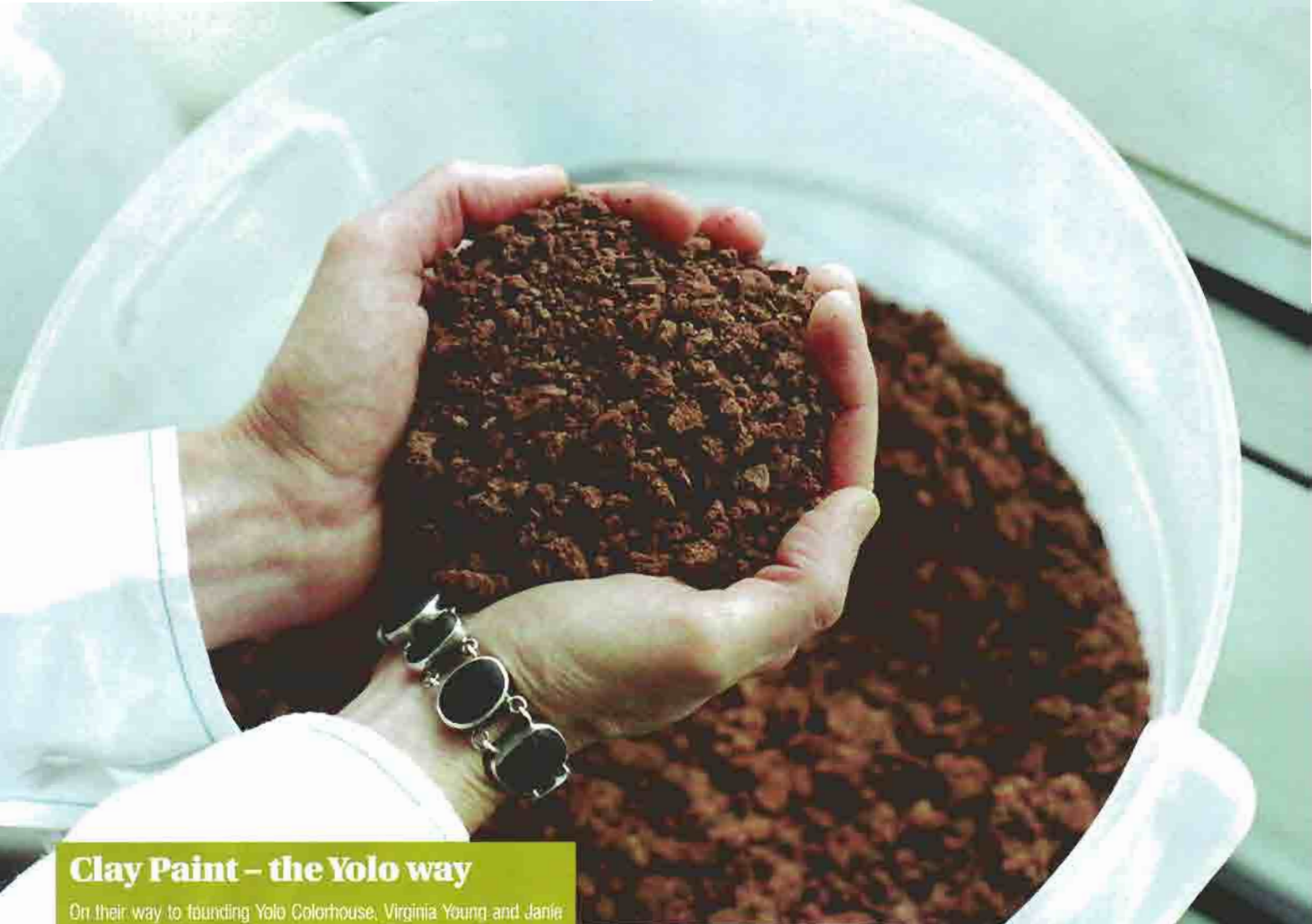
“(She) kept us accountable, helped us put together a business plan,” Young says.



Virginia Young



Janie Lowe



Clay Paint – the Yolo way

On their way to founding Yolo Colorhouse, Virginia Young and Janie Lowe fine-tuned their paint-and-pigment skills using old recipes for paint, the kind of mixtures that relied on natural ingredients rather than synthetic chemicals. Among their favorites (and one they still rely on for their second company, Yolo Paint, which specializes in custom interior finishes) is a clay paint recipe from www.canelproject.com.

Ingredients needed:

- Water
- Rice flour
- Dry, powdered clay
- A filler such as chalk, mica, marble dust or fine sand
- Dry pigments (optional)

Directions:

Begin by boiling 1 1/2 parts water.

Mix separately:

- 1 part rice flour
- 2 parts water

Add flour/water mixture to boiling water.

Turn down heat and stir until entire mixture turns translucent and shiny.

Dilute 1 part of the resulting rice-paste mixture with 2 parts water.

Add the following dry ingredients:

- 1 part dry, powdered clay
- 5 part filler (chalk, mica, marble dust or fine sand are acceptable)

Dry pigments, if needed

Mix with a small drill paddle.

Adjust the consistency with water – for rolling, it should be a pudding-like thickness.

The business lessons learned at the center seem to be paying off. As part of the licensing deal they eventually struck with Rodda, Lowe and Young receive a percentage from the sale of paint that Rodda places in its own stores. In addition to Oregon and Washington state locations, Rodda plans to introduce the Yolo paint line in the Bay area in California during the month of August.

But Lowe and Young are free to also find other retailers interested in carrying their paint line. Environmental Building Supply, for example, offers Yolo paints in its stores in Portland and Bend.

As their product's marketplace begins to spread north and south, Lowe and Young also are picking up speed as they work to build their company's marketing materials. There are 150-foot-long stretches of backing to be painted with rollers, the lengths of which are then cut into shorter pieces with strips of sticky tape placed on the back to allow clients to place the oversized swatches directly on walls during color planning. And within the next few months, Lowe and Young will dig back to their company's roots, pulling Mason jars and apothecary bottles from shelves in their Southeast Portland studio, grinding minerals and clays as they mix up possible new colors to add to their paint line.

It's a never ending recipe of a business plan, but it's also one that Young and Lowe seem to relish as they create a business acumen based on artistic senses.

"As we grow, we're learning about how to keep up with manufacturing," Young says. ■