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One nation under gourd

By Colleen Cason [ccason@ VenturaCountyStar.com](mailto:ccason@VenturaCountyStar.com)
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Suz Rawn is so into gourds, some might say she is a tad out of hers.

The otherwise seemingly sane schoolteacher maintains these odd-shaped orbs speak to her. Mostly they say, "Devote hours of your life and tons of cash to us."

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But Rawn -- the gourd lady of Somis -- is too far gone for an intervention.

"I was sunk, down the drain," said Rawn of the first time she saw gourd art four years ago.

Today her yard is crisscrossed by gourd-bearing vines. Her living room serves as a gallery for her prize-winning creations. Her bedroom studio is crammed with tools and paints and stacked with gourds that haven't fully explained what Rawn should do with them.

For almost as long as I have written this column, I have been pitched stories about gourders, and I have resisted. All kinds of people engage in all kinds of arcane activities that I don't write about.

But after meeting Rawn I came to realize gourd artists are so completely wrapped up in what they do, their enthusiasm verges on fanaticism.

Rawn basically takes a gourd's-eye view of the world. Where you and I see a pine tree, she sees needles and cones to stick on a gourd.

You and I see a pepper pod; she sees something that could be stuck on a gourd.

You and I see a wad of gum on the sidewalk, she ... You get the idea.

She has stockpiled coyote pelts, mini-lights, feathers and Chore Boy pot scrubbers to someday stick to a gourd.

And where you and I see the humble vegetable's limitations, she sees its possibilities: bird feeder, doll, oil lamp, hat,

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Santa figure, musical instrument or tortilla warmer.

Always an artistic person, Rawn finds gourds the perfect canvas for her creativity and the craft skills she's picked up in her 67 years.

She shellacks, paints, beads, burnishes and stitches on gourds. She even puts pearls inside gourds for effect.

She loves gourds, warts and all. In truth, serious gourders rarely work on those bumpy, brightly colored globes arriving at produce stands right now.

They go for gourds with a plainer, thicker skin and about the size of stock pots. These sell for \$30 to \$50 each and can be harvested only once a year.

Gourd art is not for the faint of heart. The stuff inside is toxic and when cleaning the specimens, the cautious gourder wears a respirator mask. So they also must sacrifice vanity for their art.

And that's not all. To burn images into them, Rawn uses a device that heats up to 1,600 degrees in about the time it takes to strike a match.

I watched Rawn as she seared the skin of her gourd. A spark glanced off and landed on the carpet. She was oblivious to it. I watched, however, until it turned into harmless ash.

That's about exciting as it gets. Rawn tells me beading on gourds is like watching paint dry.

Despite its rigors, the popularity of gourd art is growing, says Lisa Toth, regional director the Channel Islands Gourd Society. Recently a specimen painted by the so-called gourd goddess Denise Meyers sold for \$20,000. Also, Toth points out, with each passing year her group exhibits at the Ventura County Fair, fewer people ask, "What the heck is a gourd?"

True fanatics are such sticklers they even fault domestic doyenne Martha Stewart for not paying enough attention to detail in the gourd art that appeared in her magazine. Fortunately, she'll have plenty of time to perfect her gourding skills while in the pokey.

Toth admits to being a gourd addict. She sells a line of craft paint to partially allay her expenditures.

Rawn has so far held onto all the pieces she has created. In part because she names each and every one of them. "You name your children, don't you?" she asked me with a sly smile.

Rawn's gourd addiction may not be terminal, but she definitely is in gourd condition.

-- To see gourd mania in action, visit Gourd Fair LA 2004 on Oct. 23 and 24 at the Arboretum of Los Angeles in Arcadia (<http://www.gourdfairla.org>) or the gourd festival at Faulkner Farm pumpkin patch in Santa Paula on Oct. 30 (<http://www.faulknerfarm.com/>). The Star takes no responsibility should you get addicted.

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