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"I Just Want to Say Two Words: Plastics and Clay"

For centuries, potters have shaped clay into vases, amphoras, and other containers. Next, clay may find a new home in plastic goods, says Evangelos Manias, a materials scientist at Pennsylvania State University.

Blending minuscule amounts of natural clay with the plastics used in soft-drink bottles, for example, could yield new containers suitable for beer and wine. Today's polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottles are easily penetrated by oxygen, which changes the taste of these beverages. A little clay "can reduce the oxygen permeability by 50 times," says Manias.

Common household goods such as foamed-plastics cushions, mattresses, and cabinets would also benefit from such a mixture. Clay would make them less likely to catch fire from a dropped match or cigarette. And when fires occur, the burning plastics wouldn't generate as much noxious gas--giving the occupants of a room or airplane precious additional time to escape. Best of all, says Manias, clay is dirt cheap, and clay-polymer mixtures can be processed by existing machinery with little or no adjustment.

By Petti Fong

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