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ARTS

Fired, not fried

Bakersville potter powers new kiln with used vegetable oil

By Sue Wasserman
CITIZEN-TIMES CORRESPONDENT

BAKERSVILLE — Eating fried foods isn't something Kent McLaughlin typically encourages. Unless, of course, diners are eating at Sallie's Mountain View restaurant in Bakersville.

"In that case," he smiles, "I hope they order an extra dish of onion rings."

What accounts for the shameless promotion? McLaughlin, one half of the pottery-making duo that comprises Bakersville based Fork Mountain Pottery, is harnessing Sallie's used vegetable oil to fire his new kiln.

The idea was born while McLaughlin was visiting a fellow potter in Minnesota. "He was going to order burners designed specifically to burn off old oils. The idea behind the design was that by burning them, these used oils wouldn't seep into the ground," McLaughlin explains. "Because I was building a new kiln, I decided to order two for myself. I'd read that people were converting diesel engines to run on vegetable oil. I thought this was the perfect opportunity to see what vegetable oil firings would do to my pots."

With no instructions to guide him, McLaughlin was forced to experiment.

"I'm used to figuring things out on my own or brainstorming with friends," he allows. "Being a potter is all about trial and error, from finding the right clay body and developing the most suitable glaze combinations, to determining the best way to fire the work you create, whether it's wood, electric or gas."

"Did I know what would happen on the first firing? No. But, hey," he laughs, "you pay your money, and you take your chances."

Of course, paying his money is exactly what McLaughlin isn't doing. "There were several ideas I liked about using vegetable oil," he says. "First, it's a natural product that's more environmentally responsible than propane. Second, it's free. All I have to do is transport it from Sallie's."

Mutually beneficial partnership

Sallie McKinney, owner of Sallie's Mountain View, benefits as well because she no longer pays to have the used oil transported from her premises.

"This has been a great convenience for me," says McKinney. "I was getting charged about \$260 every three months to have the old oil taken away. The fact that Kent wants it for his kiln makes things easier for me. One of these days, when I'm not running around for the restaurant, I'll actually head up to his studio to see what he's doing. I've heard his work is beautiful."

Although he didn't want to completely load the kiln on his first firing, McLaughlin created a solid sampling of work to determine the oil's effect. He is best-known for using shino glazes on porcelain, which produce an off-peach color when fired. In fact, he's teaching a class this fall at the Penland School of Crafts titled Shino and Porcelain — The Perfect Match. He also enjoys working with mashiko khaki glazes, which turn a deep brown, much like the fertile grounds that surround McLaughlin's studio and home.

"Customers tell me that the glaze patterns on some of my pots look like mountain scenes," McLaughlin says. "That's great to hear because those mountains are my inspiration."

Fine-tuning the operation

Since he was using both his new cross-draft kiln and a new energy source, McLaughlin wasn't sure what to expect. He knew to make a few adjustments because the oil flame would be longer than a gas flame, but not as long as wood. "So I built the burn chamber to accommodate the length of the flame. I wanted

Want to go?

Fork Mountain Pottery is at 1782 Fork Mountain Road, Bakersville. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Pottery can be seen at www.pottersoftheroan.com. For information, call 688-9297.

the flame to go across the bottom, draw up sideways through the kiln and out the chimney."

Once the firing process began, McLaughlin kept adding a bit of wood here, adjusting the vegetable oil burner there, turning the initial pilot burners off and generally just doodling around. "I was slightly excited and marginally nervous," he offers. "Three firings from now, I'm sure I'll have all the information I need, but these first few are all about testing and gathering information."

Gather information he did. Overall, McLaughlin considers the firing a success. "Even though some of the work on the very bottom shelf was under-fired," he notes, "the temperature, which reached 2,380 degrees Fahrenheit, stayed pretty even, which is good. I love what it did to the mashiko khaki pots. And it worked well with the shinos, too. I think what I'll do next time is make the chimney a little taller and then take a few bricks down on the inside where the flame is directed. That should help the bottom pieces reach the right temperature."

McLaughlin's wife, potter Suze Lindsay, is also excited by the results.

"Now we know the burners work; it's just a matter of refining," she said.

Although Lindsay's work is made with different glazes and fired in a salt kiln, she's open to new ceramic options: "Even though it means determining new glazes, I'm looking forward to being able to experiment with fresh ideas in this kiln."

Now that McLaughlin knows vegetable oil firings work, he's got another idea. "I've started looking for an old Toyota diesel truck to convert and run on vegetable oil," he says. "I can't wait to pick up oil and deliver pots to my galleries in a vegetable oil-powered truck."

Sue Wasserman is a Burnsville-based freelance writer. She can be reached at writestuff@mindspring.com.



Sue Wasserman photos/SPECIAL TO THE CITIZEN-TIMES
Kent McLaughlin's kiln towers over his Bakersville studio. He fuels the furnace with recycled cooking oil from a nearby restaurant.



Functional ceramics are cured in the kiln.



Kent McLaughlin is best-known for the shino glazes he applies to porcelain. He's teaching a class on his technique at the Penland School of Crafts this fall.

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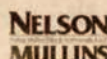
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