

# All that muck!

## Beautiful pottery from native clay

by Janet Wallace

"We had been settled here for quite a while before we noticed so much clay about," says Judy Tait. Recognition of this abundance of local clay, an interest in pottery, and a sense of adventure are what led Judy and her husband, David, to create the Albert County Clay Company.

New Brunswick's Albert County extends from south of Moncton to Alma, and runs along the Petitcodiac River, which feeds into Shepody Bay, which in turn feeds into Chignecto Bay. The shoreline reflects the tidal extremes of the Bay of Fundy by revealing expansive red tidal flats at low tide. The red "muck" of the tidal flats is an iron-rich mix of clay, limestone, silt, and saltwater.

In 1699, Acadians settled in the area and began to build dykes along the tributaries of the Petitcodiac. The dykes kept the saltwater out, creating fertile farmland and (incidentally) providing ideal conditions to protect the estuarine clay from saltwater.

The Tait's clay comes from near the dykelands of the Petitcodiac but the specific source is a secret. When I ask David where he got the clay, he says (while laughing), "If I tell you, I would have to kill you." The New Brunswick Geological Survey recorded the deposit in the mid-1800s, yet the Tait's believe that before then the Acadians and Mi'kmaq likely used the clay in making things like bowls and bake ovens.

### THE SEARCH FOR CLAY

The Tait's need clay that is pliable and plastic yet strong enough to withstand being fired in a kiln at 2000 degrees Fahrenheit. In their search for the ideal clay, they found a lot of types, ranging in color from gray to red to a bright orange. They shaped and fired samples. Some exploded in the kiln; others melted. Eventually the Tait's found one that worked.

"It was a real hardship getting it at first," Judy says. "We collected it all using buckets, and wet clay is very heavy. But



Judy Tait removes pottery from the kiln. The kiln reaches temperatures of 2000 degrees Fahrenheit and it was trial and error in finding a clay that worked for them.

(Janet Wallace photos)

we found a source that fired beautifully. And then we thought we should talk to the landowner to ask permission to use it." Fortunately, the landowners were willing to allow the Tait's to take some clay. The landowners even own heavy machinery and now dig up and deliver the clay – tons of it at a time.

As an art student, Judy had studied pottery years ago but chose to specialize in fabric design. She taught surface (fabric)

design in the New Brunswick College of Craft and Design in Fredericton for years. She is still involved in silk screen work with her other business, Samphire Casuals. David taught sheet metal work at the community college in Moncton for 20 years before retiring and becoming responsible for preparing the clay for Judy's pottery.

"Once Judy started making pottery," David says, "I started hearing, 'David, I



need more clay.” Judy adds, “And that’s still going on.”

### PROCESSING THE CLAY

The process of going from wet clay straight from the ground to a workable pottery medium is complicated and time-consuming. Through ingenuity and patience, David developed a system that works for them, and Judy uses her creativity to transform the clay into artwork.

The first step is drying the clay. Initially, they dried the clay outside in the sun, but that process was too slow and didn’t work in the winter. So, David built a drying chamber made of screened shelves where the clay is essentially baked at low heat. The dry clay is then pulverized into powder in a machine that David built; it’s something akin to a small cement mixer. The clay is then sifted through screens to remove foreign material, such as dried plant material and sand. When Judy needs more, David adds water to the powdered clay, which transforms it from grayish-white powder to red clay.

The damp clay needs to be “wedged,” which means taking all the air out of it. Air in the clay can make it more difficult to work with, and (more dramatically) can cause the pottery to explode in the kiln. David uses a pugmill, a piece of equipment with an auger to push the clay and a vacuum pump to suck the air out. He then rolls the clay into thin sheets with a mechanical press.

### MAKING POTTERY

Judy now takes over. She shapes the flat slabs of clay into vases, wine coolers, bowls, plates, and more. She presses flowers, leaves, seaweed, shells and/or grasses into the damp clay, which leaves intricate imprints. After she works the clay, the pottery is left to dry and its color changes from red to white. It is then fired in the kiln, and acquires a light brick-red color.

After the first firing (the bisque firing), Judy coats the interior of most pieces with a clear glaze to make them watertight. For some, she also applies a lightly-tinted glaze on the exterior. The glazed pottery is fired again at 2000 degrees Fahrenheit for eight hours. It takes another eight hours to cool down. The color changes

to a deep terracotta as the iron oxidizes in the heat.

### FACING CHALLENGES

The company has been in business for six years. Finding the appropriate clay was only one of the many challenges the Taits have faced. Investing in equipment was also a big decision.

Another pivotal point came when the business outgrew the house. At the time, they were working in the old Coryville schoolhouse, a building they had also lived in until they built a house across the road. Between the schoolhouse and their own house lay the abandoned Curryville Community Hall. The hall is now used as the workshop, the schoolhouse is the gallery, and the house across the road is for living.

Marketing takes up a lot of their time. “It’s hard being an artisan and a business person,” Judy says. The pottery is sold to craft stores across the Maritimes. It is also used for corporate gifts. For example, a company that sells corporate



gifts to the federal government buys pieces decorated with maple leaves to give to foreign visitors.

### CLAY COMPULSION

Judy loves doing the pottery and enjoys the connection between the land and the art. "As a society, we're always going away from that... losing the connection to local resources."

Her clay isn't like the standard commercial pottery clay. She finds its limitations have forced her to become more creative, to think of designs that work with, not against, the clay. On the other hand, she tried using commercial clay recently and found that it didn't hold up to the designs she now uses with the local clay.

David likes the connection with local history. In the 1800s, the Albert Brick, Lime, and Cement Company operated just up the road from them. He points out that "just about any clay can be used for brick."



David Tait demonstrates how the tumbler, used to break up the dry clay, works.

He jokes that the pottery has "become a compulsion for Judy. We'll be driving down the road and she'll say 'stop, there could be clay there' or 'let's get some of those leaves.'"

If it's a compulsion, it seems to be a healthy one. Judy describes her work as "exciting and rewarding in many ways." She appreciates how pottery involves both

her mind and her body at the same time.

In the Albert County Clay Company, Judy and David Tait have found a way not just to merge their skills, but also their passion for art, nature, and their local environment.

(Janet Wallace likes to grow food from the clay in her soil, and has just started to learn how to make pottery from commercial clay. She is also a freelance writer and the editor of *The Canadian Organic Grower*.) ●

## How to prepare your own clay (the slow way)\*

1. Spread in a thin layer and allow to dry in the sun.

2. Pound the clay with a baseball bat or heavy rolling pin until it's as fine as sand.

3. Sift through a large kitchen strainer or window screen.

4. Put the clay powder in water. Use 1/2 to 3/4 as much clay powder as water. Let the clay absorb some of the water before stirring to prevent lumps. Then stir until thoroughly mixed.

5. Let the wet mixture settle for half a day and then pour off the excess water.

6. Store the clay in plastic bag and let age for three weeks before using.

7. "Wedge" the clay to remove excess air by kneading it on a sheet of unfinished plywood, a plaster surface, or a large piece of unfinished wood.

Now you're ready to make pottery, though there is no guarantee the pieces will withstand the heat of the kiln.

\*Based on instructions from "The Potter's Primer" by Eleanor Chroman, 1974, Hawthorn Press. ●



Judy Tait arranges pieces of pottery taken straight from the kiln. The inset photo shows examples of pieces that are (from left to right) unfired, bisque-fired (fired once), and fired twice. The color intensifies with each firing as the iron oxidizes in the high heat.