

The Highs and Lows of Making Pots

by John Dix



"Whiskey Snifter," 3 inches (8 centimeters) in height, stoneware with Shino glaze, wood fired in an anagama/noborigama.

Recently, I've been thinking a lot about why I make pots. For some time, I've thought that there were two great highs, along with a number of mini highs, and a few lows, as well as the occasional great low. I probably haven't thought enough about the lows or the number of great lows, which would include kilns not reaching temperature, glaze failures and bad shows. Instead, I've been dwelling on the highs, and I discovered a third great high to add to the list.

The first of the three great highs is the initial making, for me, the throwing of a pot. There are very few human endeavors equal to making pots, which requires combining physical energy with mental creativity. Lots of jobs make you sweat, and athletes talk about a "runner's high," but creativity is severely limited or nonexistent. I find little joy in purely physical labor. And mentally creative pursuits are so numerous that I cannot begin to name them all. But I have trouble coming up with other occupations that require such a wonderful combination of endorphin-producing physical labor with nonstop creative deci-

Kiln furniture from an old Shigaraki kiln now serves as an umbrella holder outside John Dix's studio in Mishinomiya, Japan.



Dix fires his ware in a combination anagama/noborigama.

sion making, aside from potters, glassblowers, blacksmiths and maybe jazz or rock musicians. There has been more than one afternoon in the studio when, with sweat pouring down my face, I crank up the music a little more and do a dance to thank my lucky stars that I somehow became a potter.

The second great high is when I open and unload the kiln. I fire an anagama/noborigama for up to a week. Actually, there are a lot of

highs and lows during a week of firing. A few highs worth mentioning include Cone 11 going flat, the look of white heat, and seeing accumulated ash flux and flow down the pots. Then there's that very unique buzz I get from the glass of sake I reward myself with when the last wood has been stoked and the kiln sealed (preferably as the sun comes up). That is a good feeling. Conversely, the lows that are possible during a long firing—caused, for example, by the temperature refusing to climb as I run out of wood—are unrivaled for their bile-producing effect. But after a good firing, with Cone 11 long since puddled and solidified, and a week's recovery from the firing, I am back at the kiln chipping the clay off the door, removing those first bricks. Palms clammy, I reach for the flashlight and take that first look. This is the point where my heart either soars or sinks into that pool of bile again rising in my stomach.

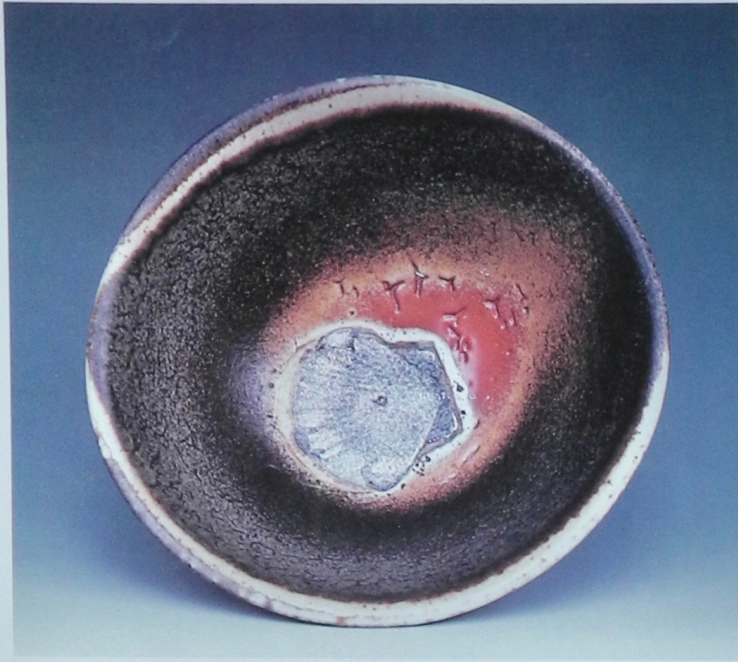
A good firing can bring tears to my eyes—all that hard work, plus that intangible bit of serendipity. The work is loaded naked

and comes out with a beauty that, while it was I who created the situation where all this could happen, some other force came in to finish the job. Unloading the kiln takes a full day, and cleaning the pots many more. And throughout, I discover and rediscover all the wonderful things that are going on in the work. It is at this point, as when I finish throwing, that I feel so lucky to be doing what I do.

I recently realized there is another great high for potters. It is when a customer, or any observer, really "gets" the work. It touches that person deeply. I imagine that this high generally comes late to most potters, for it takes a long time to develop one's work to the point where it can seriously move another person. And I'm not talking about friends, relatives or even other potters. Of course, one of the mini lows is when friends say they love the work, but from their glazed-over eyes, I know they are just trying to be nice. Converting them to where they truly get it is a worthy, though usually frustrating, pursuit. Some people are



Vase, 23 inches (58 centimeters) in height, coil-built stoneware, with natural ash glaze, fired near the mouth of the first chamber.



Teabowl, 7 inches (18 centimeters) in diameter, with shell imprint from firing.

never going to. But when a stranger deeply appreciates my work, really gets what I am doing, the feeling is great.

Last year, while I was doing an exhibition in a department store in Osaka, a young *sarariman* (the local vernacular for a businessman) came in and picked up a whiskey snifter. The form and the idea behind my whiskey snifter has been evolving over a number of years. I wanted to make a cup for the overworked men in Japan. The poor schmo who boards a packed train at 7 A.M. for the 90-minute commute to the office, works 12 hours, and gets home at 10 P.M. on a good night. My hope is that, after a long day, this cup will help calm his soul just a little.

While I'm not a whiskey drinker, it is one of the most popular drinks in Japan. With bottles of single malt selling for hundreds of dollars, it seemed like a no-brainer, especially in this pottery-crazed country, to make a special cup for it.



"Slab Plate with Shells," 12 inches (30 centimeters) in length, wood-fired stoneware with Shino glaze.

The sniffers are thrown thick, then, while still slowly spinning on the wheel, faceted with a wire, giving them an ergonomically asymmetrical shape. They are considerably larger than a sake cup, but much smaller than a teabowl. Glazed with a Shino-type glaze and fired to get considerable exposure to ash, they are dynamic little pieces.

So, this young businessman spent maybe an hour looking at the different sniffers. I was busy with other customers, but every time I looked over, he was deeply studying these cups, meditatively turning each one in his hand, checking out the foot, then the lip. Occasionally, I would catch his eye, and by the look on his face, I could see that this was something new to him. He had probably never seen a whiskey snifter before. I'm pretty certain he had never seen a cup like this.

I could see he was impressed, and I was savoring the moment. Finally, I went over to talk with him. He must have said *sugoi*, which means great or fantastic (or utterly terrible, depending on the context), a dozen times. He had his choice narrowed down to two cups—a nice medium-priced one in one hand, and my personal favorite (which was going for almost twice the price) in the other. He bought the cheaper one, while promising to ask his wife if he could buy the more expensive one. Sure enough, the next day the couple arrived shortly after I did. I watched as he explained the cup to her. While I don't think she fully got the whiskey sniffers, she did get that he got it and let him buy the second one.

Another big high at this exhibition was the positive feedback on my teabowls. While I've made teabowls for many years, I had been reluctant to show them. The tea ceremony is so revered here and the practitioners have such a doctrinaire viewpoint that potters showing teabowls open themselves to a possible broadside of criticism. I love to have tea with my friends. We even have a small tea house next to the kiln, but I doubt I could ever become a serious student of the ceremony. It is a very strict discipline with rules governing almost every action. To see it done properly is a beautiful thing, but as roads to enlightenment go, the "way of tea" is a little too long and narrow for me.

I still love to make teabowls, though. I was showing both traditional forms and ones that I knew would draw the wrath of the tea people. Like the whiskey sniffers, the teabowls were glazed with Shino and fired where they would get a lot of ash. The problematic ones were open, summer-style bowls. The shapes were fairly conventional, but when loading them into the kiln, I had put a small scallop shell in the bottom of each to support a

sake cup. The sake cup divided the flame and created a shadow where ash could not settle. The result was a halo or comet effect around the shell. It is a good trick when it works, and it worked well in this firing.

The problem is the shell, which leaves a slightly rough surface in the bottom of the teabowl. I knew these surfaces would cause trouble going in, but my hope was for beauty to win out over functional concerns. As I anticipated, while the tea people praised my bowls overall, they wouldn't go for the shell ones, claiming the shell would damage their whisks. That led to some lively arguments—me, claiming that I have never damaged a whisk and that they should view it as a challenge, not a detriment; them, shaking their heads and essentially saying, "No, no no. It's against the rules." I don't think I convinced anyone; however, I did manage to sell all but one teabowl. The traditional ones went in the first couple of days, mainly to tea-ceremony practitioners. The shell ones took a bit longer, and were purchased by collectors.

A mini low at the show was the reception (or lack thereof) of a new bottle shape. I call them pyramid bottles for obvious reasons. Thrown, then faceted with a wire, they were fired unglazed around the firemouth. It's a great shape for that area of the kiln, being virtually impossible to tip over. I love these pots, but people just



Pyramid bottles, to 7 inches (18 centimeters) in height, wood-fired stoneware with local clay slip (left) and natural ash, by John Dix, Nishinomiya, Japan.

walked by them as if they weren't there. Nobody got them. I think I love them even more after the neglect they received.

Now, I know that the third great high is basically a huge ego stroke, but really it is much more than that. On a deeper, more important level, it validates the first two great highs. Artists/craftspeople who work in a vacuum only for the sake of creation, never needing recognition from peers, are a rare breed, if indeed they even exist. I, for one, find that praise for my work feels great. Again, I feel very lucky to be a potter.