

Feeding the Process

by Pam Lau

Pam Lau works with Dan Ody at Ardeinheim Clayworks Studio in southeastern Pennsylvania. Her address is 3470 Newark Road, Lincoln University, PA 19352.



The best chicken I ever tasted was when I was thirty-five.

I remember checking the menu for our evening at Chez Panisse: *Warm chanterelle toasts with DeeAnn's garden lettuces, potato gnocchi with wilted greens and garlic, spit-roasted Hoffman chicken with fried onion rings and romano beans, and almond meringue with raspberries and fraises des bois.* Disappointed, I wondered about going all the way to Berkeley, California to eat...chicken. According to the USDA, the average person will eat eighty-plus pounds of chicken this year. The possibility of lamb or even venison seemed more interesting to me than chicken, the mundane white meat.

Our night was magical. The food was eye-opening and engaging, simply and carefully prepared and beautifully presented. The flavors and textures were sublime and clean. Local, amazingly fresh ingredients – what Alice Waters has promoted since she opened Chez Panisse in 1971 – were used and easily identified as such. Working hard to set up local, environmentally aware sources for her ingredients, Alice knows the folks who grew most of them. The event totally changed our outlook on food, and I can still feel the crispy chicken skin which complemented the juicy, flavorful, perfectly-brined meat.

Globalization has let us get our hands on just about anything. It's possible to get line-caught wild salmon from Tasmania, less than forty-eight hours out of the water, delivered right to your door in Pennsylvania. You can get Tennessee ball clay, Avery clay from North Carolina, and even Shigaraki clay from Japan. Cherishing such foreign commodities as salt, spices, gold, coffee, and oil, people have been working on long-distance marketing and distribution for thousands of years.

As a potter, I cherish clay. Like most of us, I

got my first taste of clay on the bank of a small stream behind a friend's house. We made things out of the creamy clay and let them dry in the sun, only to have them reclaimed by clumsy hands, weather, and time. My second taste of using local clay was in Japan, where we gathered and processed mountain clay to use during a workshop in Tokoname.

My next local clay source was our backyard in Lincoln University, Pennsylvania, where I had a click of understanding about materials and research. Until now I had mixed clay under the supervision of instructors and recipes. All the years of mixing and following formulas gave me a baseline understanding of how materials should feel, look, and sometimes smell. The clay in our backyard triggered the idea of a low-temperature anagama firing, although I had for the most part focused on high-fire ceramics. Totally out of our element, the students and I worked to develop clays, slips, terra sigillatas, and glazes to fire at cone 04. We tried many things and the class as a whole finished with a much better understanding of materials and how to tweak recipes to achieve a desired result.

Next, my husband Dan happened on an article by Maggie Creshkoff about the Stancills Clay Mine, which is about thirty-five minutes south of our home. Dan went to the mine and met Emlyn. He brought home some samples and we began researching possibilities for our anagama-style kiln. We came up with names for different clay types – lipstick red, purple clay, settling pond clay. We tested recipes using different Stancills clays and found that many worked well in certain zones of the kiln. Next we returned to the mine with our brand new – to us – 1986 Chevy dump truck.

On its very first load we were sure that we had broken our truck and would be forbidden ever to return to the mine. Our truck bed was



ten feet long; the smallest Stancills loader was twelve feet long. Dick, the operator, estimated our truck's load capacity, took what looked like a small scoop, and dumped it into our bed. The bed went down to the helper springs and did not budge back. Dan, Emlyn, and I frantically peeled clay out of the truck until Emlyn's father, Terry, drove up to close the mine for the day. Since then we have had many adventures with Emlyn in and out of the mine; her two-year-old daughter Rhys learned the words "Mama stuck" during one of them. Listening to Terry's stories about growing up around Stancills mine quickly established the connection among three generations and similar personalities of the Stancill family.

Like using local ingredients for cooking, being able to use Stancills clay has been an influence on our quality of life. Unprocessed ceramic materials are an amazing resource, and we are lucky to have found them close to where we live. Challenging ourselves to transform clay out of the ground into clay bodies that are up to the rigors and expectations of anagama-style firings is both exciting and, at times, very disappointing. We have found that using unprocessed clay helps determine our forms; it is not necessarily as smooth or plastic as commercial clay and contains varying particle sizes. Picturing the original source and being able to remember where the clay for a fired cup once was located further connects us with our clay. The human element of knowing the Stancill family also means so much to us. This knowledge helps us to understand the whole picture. We love watching the sunset as we shovel the last bit of gray clay into the load (we fill our dump truck by hand now).

The mine is a living thing, changing as materials are removed; sometimes Emlyn calls us to come see the mine when it changes.

Coming Home, held concurrently with NCECA 2005, was a further transformation. Emlyn and Jonesy, an equipment operator, laid out the gallery in the mine, and we were invited to dig our clay for pots and literally excavate our "pedestals." Once again, the clay told us what we could or could not do. Designing a space within Stancills Mine and its elements was a great experience. The setting could not have been more stunning or humbling, and once again the clay brought a group of folks together to challenge and teach one another. The event made us into a community, thanks to the support, effort, and generosity of the Stancill family.

Spring is here; we focus on preparing wood for a firing, returning to the mine for clay, making work in our studio, and growing vegetables in our garden. Repeating rhythms associated with seasons have become a natural starting point and culminate in meals with friends in our barn. We work together building traditions, rituals, and memories. At our meals we use all our senses and the memories created by our senses. We see the forms and texture of the clay objects. We remember the damp smell of the clay and the wood smoke from firing the clay. We smell food wafting from our clay plates. We remember the sizzle of burning wood and hear the crunch of our vegetables. We feel the forms with our hands and lips along with the food textures in our mouths. We taste the fruits of our efforts. We feel involved, connected, and engaged by the pots, their process, and the geological beginnings of the clay. Mostly, we feel lucky to do what we do.

ABOVE: *Wall vase installation at the Stancill Mine exhibition.*

BELOW AND OPPOSITE: *Wood-fired temoku-glazed cups.*

