



Cooking with Clay

BY LAURIE LAMOUNTAIN

I first discovered the joy of cooking in clay when I moved to San Francisco in the '80s to help launch a sister store to The Alsatian Kitchen, a wonderful but bygone import shop in Portland's Old Port that featured Soufflenheim and Betschdorf pottery from Alsace, France. The first thing I discovered about clay cookware was that most Americans—even Californians—didn't have a clue how to use it and were drawn more to its decorative than utilitarian merits. The second thing I discovered, in stocking my own kitchen with the few pieces that had not survived the transcontinental journey unscathed, is what the rest of the

world has known for centuries—cooking in clay yields spectacular results.

Rusty Wiltjer, who has been making things from clay since he attended Ohio State University in 1970 and recently added cookware to the long list of his clay creations, wouldn't cook in anything else.

"When I know I'm right is when I don't want to sell it and I want to keep it. Of course, financially-slash-economically, that's not feasible for me. For instance, this new batch of cookware, I'd keep it all. I just love it. I want to use it. But that's a good sign. That tells me everything is running true, to myself and to whoever this is being passed on to."

Rusty, who came to Maine to visit a friend in 1972 and never left, is probably best known for his Chain of Life wind chimes, but his repertoire also includes custom sinks, ceramic drums and outdoor fountains. He only recently began making cookware. As useful as it is beautiful, it can be used on a gas range top or in the oven.

"My tendency from Day One was that the designs I come up with are always a little different than the traditional potter—like the drums and sinks. The sinks were challenging. And I thrive on challenge. Everything I do seems to be more difficult than not. I've never designed something that was

very simple and it sells a million. I guess I'm not a traditional potter in that sense. The cookware sort of falls in line with that. The design aspect is probably the most exciting time; coming up with these ideas and then working through three or four generations of that design to get it to perfection—to function properly.

When I'm done with something, functionally (and this is the key word) it's complete. When you pick up one of my mugs, it will be balanced in your hand, it won't spill out of the side of your mouth and you won't want to put it down. It's the same thing with the cookware, the drums, the sinks; I get them to that perfected state, and then I'm ready to move on to the next thing."

Rusty attributes some of his attitude and approach to his genetic roots.

"The Dutch in me finds a way to maximize functionality."

He also credits his Japanese instructor who, with limited English, gave him the discipline he lacked by virtue of his uncompromising standards. It's from him that Rusty learned how to make a perfectly dripless spout.

"I'm all for art-for-art and visual expression. If you want to take clay and throw it against the wall and watch it drip down,



that's valid. But if you're drinking from a mug that looks like a cow and it spills out of your mouth, it's a piece of junk. When it's supposed to function, the beauty is in how well it does its job."

That careful consideration of function is what drives the design of his cookware. He compares the radiant capacity of clay to the way that a cast iron wood stove heats evenly throughout. His clay pots work the same way, which is why they perform so well in the oven. How they differ from metal cookware is that you wouldn't want to take one from the refrigerator and immediately place it over a high flame or in a preheated oven. He recommends starting with a low flame, "just to be kind."

"The pot will tolerate the other, but as with all things, the physics involved is that if you constantly push things to their extreme, you're gonna fatigue them. This is really just the sensibility of saying, 'OK, this will take it, but let's make this thing last longer. Why fatigue the pot?'"

To further illustrate this concept, he relates going up on his roof the week before to remove three feet of snow before the incoming rain.

"When I was done shoveling it, I could feel the house exhale. I know it sounds crazy, but everything to me has a life to it that you impact in one way or another. The same sensibility applies to [clay] cookware."

Having said that, he's quick to clarify between being kind and doing what's necessary.

"You hear a lot about slow cooking in clay as a process and you certainly can do that, but when I'm making egg drop soup and it requires that I bring the water to boil to cook the noodles, I bring it to a boil! That's not really slow cooking. It's really whatever the food requires it to do, but in a gentle way."

When it comes to baking bread, his pots become an oven within the oven. The ones he designs specifically for bread are as tall as they are wide in order to accommodate a traditional boule. He lines the bottom of the bread baker with parchment paper before placing the dough inside and mists the dough before covering it. By removing the cover and raising the temperature during the last ten minutes of baking, the result is a crusty boule that is very easy to make.

The chicken cooker he designed is a two-piece pot with an insert for the liquid that will essentially steam/roast the chicken from the inside out. Think Beer-Can Chicken on the grill.

He points out that while rice cooked in a stainless pot may require the addition of more liquid before it's done, he has never had to add liquid to his clay rice pot. When things are fired properly and up to temperature (2400°F), the clay body itself starts to fuse to the point where it becomes vitreous—meaning it is non-porous and won't absorb water. Vitreosity is also what makes it possible to use his cookware over an open flame or in a hot oven. To further illustrate the vitreous quality of his pottery, he taps the lid of a tagine and it rings like a bell.

Rusty explains that because of their vitreosity, glazing the entire surface is not necessary. Instead, he has crafted a custom tool to create the unique pattern that embellishes the exterior of his cookware. The inside surface is glazed to appeal to western sensibilities and allow for easy cleanup. He also selectively glazes areas that are prone to wear or handling, such as rims and handles, and spouts for ease of pouring.

As further testament to its functionality, Wiltjer Pottery cookware is dishwasher safe and, because there's no lead in the clay or the glaze, microwave safe as well. On top of that, it's beautiful—the perfect marriage of form and function.

"My biggest fear is that I'll never have another creative thought again. That's what keeps me going. That's the fuel for me to keep moving. If I settle into something, I get bored."

Let's hope Rusty never reaches that point with his cookware, but my advice would be to get your Wiltjer Pottery cookware sooner, rather than later. ✨

Wiltjer Pottery is located at 118 North Bridgton Road in Waterford, Maine 207-583-2911

In perfecting the design and function of his cookware, Rusty has been spending a lot more time in the kitchen. After all, the best way to see if something is well designed is to use it. We asked him if he would share some recipes with *Lake Living* and he graciously complied with a few of his favorites.

ROASTED CHICKEN

extra virgin olive oil
2 lemons
1/2 c water*
small handful fresh tarragon leaves, chopped
2 cloves garlic, crushed
salt and pepper
3-4 pound chicken
1 lb carrots, cut in 1-inch chunks
1 lb baby potatoes, whole
2 stalks celery, cut in 1-inch chunks
1 medium onion, quartered

Preheat oven to 350°

Lightly oil the bottom of the roasting cooker. Juice lemons (setting aside one of the juiced halves) and add to chicken roaster insert. Add water, chopped tarragon, garlic cloves and salt and pepper to taste. Whisk to emulsify, reserving two tablespoons to drizzle over the vegetables. Place the insert in the center of roasting pot and surround with vegetables. Plug the neck cavity of the chicken with the reserved half lemon and place the entire bird over the insert with the neck cavity on top. Drizzle the reserved lemon stock evenly over the vegetables and chicken. Roast for 1.5 hours or until a meat thermometer registers 160°. Turn the oven to 400° and roast for another ten minutes or until the skin is nicely browned. Remove from oven and let sit for ten minutes before carving.

*Chicken stock or dry white wine can be substituted for water.





ARTISAN BREAD

3 c flour
 1/4 tsp yeast
 1 1/2 c water
 1 tsp salt

In a large bowl, mix the above ingredients together to form a sticky dough that you'll cover tightly with plastic wrap and leave in a warm place overnight. In the morning, gently scrape the dough away from the sides of the bowl and onto a lightly floured surface with a rubber spatula. Fold the dough in thirds a few times until it becomes fairly smooth and elastic and no longer sticks to the surface. Line the bread baker with a sheet of parchment paper and place the dough on top. Turn the oven to 350° and let the dough rest in a warm place while the oven preheats. When the oven reaches temperature, slit the top of the dough with a sharp knife and mist with water before covering and placing in the oven. Bake for 40 to 45 minutes, depending on your oven. Increase heat to 400° and remove the lid to brown for another 5 to 10 minutes.

Note: Poppy or sesame seeds can be added on top after you've misted it.

LAMB TAGINE

Adapted from Melissa Clark cooking.nytimes.com

3 pounds bone-in lamb stew meat, cut into 1 1/2-inch pieces
 2 1/2 tsp kosher salt, more as needed
 1 3/4 c lamb or chicken stock
 1 c dried apricots
 2 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil, more as needed
 2 large onions, thinly sliced
 1 tsp tomato paste
 1/2 tsp grated fresh ginger

2 small cinnamon sticks
 Large pinch saffron
 1/2 tsp ground ginger
 3/4 tsp ground turmeric
 3/4 tsp ground black pepper
 1/4 tsp ground cinnamon
 Pinch freshly grated nutmeg
 1/3 c fresh cilantro, chopped
 1 tbsp unsalted butter
 1/2 c slivered almonds
 2 scallions, finely chopped
 2 Tbs chopped parsley
 Fresh lemon juice, to taste

In a large bowl, combine lamb and 2 teaspoons salt. Let sit at room temperature at least 1 hour or up to 24 hours in the refrigerator.

In a small pot, bring stock to a boil. Remove from heat, add apricots, and let sit at least 15 minutes.

Heat oven to 325°. In a tagine or Dutch oven, warm 2 tablespoons oil over medium heat until hot but not smoking. Working in batches, add lamb to pot, leaving room around each piece (this will help them brown). Cook until well browned on all sides, about 10 minutes. Transfer pieces to a plate as they brown.

Drain fat, if necessary, leaving just enough to coat the bottom of the pot. Add onions and 1/4 teaspoon salt and cook until soft, about 8 minutes. Add tomato paste, ginger, 1 cinnamon stick and the spices, and cook until fragrant, about 2 minutes. Add lamb and any juices on the plate, the apricots and stock, and half the cilantro. Cover pot with foil and then its lid, and cook in oven for 2 1/2 to 3 hours, or until lamb is tender, turning it occasionally. (If

using a tagine, you don't need to use foil.) Taste and adjust seasonings, if necessary.

Meanwhile, in a small skillet, heat butter and 1 cinnamon stick over medium heat. Add almonds and 1/4 teaspoon salt, and cook until golden brown, 5 to 7 minutes. Discard cinnamon stick.

To serve, transfer lamb and juices to a serving platter. Top with toasted almonds and any butter left in the small skillet, scallions, parsley and remaining cilantro. Sprinkle with fresh lemon juice to taste. Serve with flatbread or couscous, if desired.

MOROCCAN MINT TEA

Adapted from epicurious.com

1 tbsp loose Chinese gunpowder green tea
 5 c boiling water
 3 to 4 tbsp sugar, or to taste
 1 large bunch fresh spearmint (1 ounce), washed
 1- to 1 1/2-quart teapot

Put tea in teapot and pour in 1 cup boiling water, then swirl gently to warm pot and rinse tea. Strain and discard water, reserving tea leaves in pot. Add remaining 4 cups boiling water to tea and let steep 2 minutes. Stir in sugar (to taste) and mint and steep 3 to 4 minutes more. Serve in small heatproof glasses with sprigs of mint for garnish.

Note: An authentic Moroccan mint tea would call for stovetop preparation and bringing the tea to a boil. This is a simplified preparation.

