

CLOSE TO HOME

RICHARD ROWLAND FIRES UP NEW DRAGON KILN FOR SOUP BOWL EVENT

By DAVID CAMPICHE
FOR COAST WEEKEND

Life is a grab bag of ramped-up emotion at three o'clock in the morning. The ghost moon dangles over Tucker Creek in the foothills of Astoria. And the fire in the kiln is now 2,000 degrees and rising with flames that whirl and twist, while artisans throw in armloads of firewood — just like people did, say, 4,000 years ago, in Korea, China or Japan.

Potters chant or pray or talk quietly among themselves, or simply shut their mouths and let the heat charge up the belly of the dragon and into the chimney until it rendezvous with the stars.

Welcome to the Astoria Dragon Kiln, Richard Rowland's new Anagama-style kiln. Welcome to four years' labor and thousands of fire bricks and unmeasurable dreams and aspirations. Welcome to the potter's world.

The potters are hard at work for the once-a-year collaboration and donation of more than 400 clay soup bowls to The Harbor in Astoria and the Tillamook County Women's Resource Center, organizations that support survivors of domestic abuse, sexual assault and stalking.

The Harbor's event "Soup Bowl 2018: In Our Element," the 18th annual event of its kind, takes place 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. Saturday, June 2. Attendees pay for the bowls and get them filled with soup. Tickets are available at soubowl2018.brownpapertickets.com.

The dimensions of the bowls are specific: 6¾ inches by 3¾ when wet, and they shrink when fired.

Months have blown by like the ash that catches the wind of the dragon's fire, coating each pot with transformed firewood (wood ash turned by superheat into glaze). Here is the borderland between art and craft. Here is the Zen of clay art.

The quiet quest

Rowland, like many of the potters that support this mission, has labored at the bowl project for 18 years. He, his wife, Patty, and dozens of others have been committed to clay as an art form



DAVID CAMPICHE PHOTO

The first firing of Richard Rowland's new Dragon Kiln

for decades. And they don't seem in any rush to have time or gravity deprive them of their quest to throw better bowls.

The process is engaging, from the initial throwing of the clay (skill that takes years to master), to trimming, bisque firing, glazing and glaze firing at around 2,300 degrees.

At the kiln, six, seven or eight cords of wood are split, dried and stacked for every firing. The loading of this new kiln generally takes three days, and the firing a week. The kiln is nearly 30 feet long with a chimney that snakes even longer out of a long chamber of brick and earth and into the cerulean sky. The loading and burning of the 3-foot split wood is around-the-clock for a week.

And no matter how many times you have fired the dragon Kiln, no two firings are the same. No strategy works every time. That is part of the fun, and the challenge.

Year after year, the potters do their work quietly. And year after year, flame carries the ashes up the belly of the



DAVID CAMPICHE PHOTO

Ceramicist Richard Rowland

dragon and transforms raw clay pots into stunning vessels of beauty, depth and color.

This is a quiet world. At times, the only earthly sounds around the Anagama are the sweep of hot darting flames, or wind creeping through the forest beside the kiln. Or rain on the tin roof. Or a mother deer slinking out of the woods to examine this peculiar scene. Or breathing, ours and the dragon's.

Belief in community

This is a community kiln — meaning it takes a community to build and support this dragon vessel, and a community to bring the pots to fruition. Donations of wood are indispensable. So are the hours of commitment of each potter.

Clay pots and vessels are about as old as the earliest human habitation, and that is part of the charm and magic. Potters have always been a strong fabric in these ancient communities.

Japan loves their potters, and a number have been honored with the status of "national treasure." They are supported by



DAVID CAMPICHE PHOTO

Wood-fired bowls for The Harbor in Astoria and the Tillamook County Women's Resource Center

their government and its citizens. Of all the countries that practice the art of the clay form, Japanese potters are perhaps the most abstract in shaping their forms. Common villagers and city inhabitants revere these forms with a devotion unlike any other nation.

This fact is not lost on many potters in the Pacific Northwest and across many parts of the American landscape. These local potters see their contributions as truly significant. Prehistoric artisans painted colored clays on the walls at Lascaux. Early clay figures or clay deities travel back 60,000 years. Are not the potters at Tucker Creek engaged in this extended legacy? Are they not faithful to the same ancient quest?

As Lao Tzu stated hundreds of years before Christ:

Achieve results, but never glory in them.

Achieve results, but never boast.

Achieve results, but never be proud (too proud).

Achieve results, because that is the natural way. 