



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Josiah Ward trims off a mug's excess clay on a pottery wheel at Clay in Motion's Milton-Freewater production facility on March 11, 2020.

'Each piece is different'

Milton-Freewater business turns out thousands of hand-crafted clay items every year

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

MILTON-FREEWATER — In architecture, they say form follows function.

Clay in Motion sits at the intersection of both.

The family-owned pottery studio in Milton-Freewater turns out thousands of hand-crafted items per year they describe as functional pottery — clay mugs, cookware, lamps, soap dispensers, piggy banks, flower pots and more.

The business was started by Bob and Corina Neher in 1981. Both had developed an interest in pottery in high school, and once they got together they worked on perfecting their craft.

"To make something one time is something, but to make it 50 times is more difficult," their son, Jeff Neher, said.

He and his brother, Derek, work with Bob and Corina daily in the warehouse-sized studio, and other family members, including Bob and Corina's third son and Bob and Corina's parents, who have worked there in the past. They are assisted by several other employees who help shape, glaze, fire and ship the pottery.

Right now, Jeff said, they have been making about 700 pieces a day.

Unofficial employees are the five family dogs who roam the studio freely. On a recent day, two sat on the concrete floor and watched as Bob shaped the finer features of a piggy bank. When asked if the canines can be trusted not to topple breakable items off shelves, Jeff said it hasn't been a problem.

"They're pretty good," he said.

Some of the pieces in the studio are slip casted by pouring liquid clay into molds, while others are shaped using more traditional bricks of solid clay. They're fired in either an electric or natural gas kiln that bakes the clay at 2,100 degrees, making them oven, dishwasher and microwave safe.

After being heated and cooled down once, workers make patterns on the clay using a liquid glaze that the Neher family mix themselves. Many of the patterns involve dipping one side of the piece in one color, the other in a different color, and using plastic ketchup bottles to squeeze out a unique fingerprint of lines across the transition between the two colors.

"Each piece is different," Jeff said.

The glaze looks flat and light-colored on application, but after being superheated once again, they come out of the kiln looking dramatically different, with richer colors and a glossy shine.

The studio also makes lamps using Raku, a Japanese method where pieces are lifted out of the kiln red-hot and placed in a container of combustible material, such as newspaper, pine needles or horse hair. The burning, smoking materials create unique and unpredictable patterns across the surface.

On the bottom of cookware, such as bread pans and pie dishes, the family stamps a family recipe that can be



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Curtis Lund wipes down a freshly pressed platter at Clay in Motion's Milton-Freewater production facility. The company makes use of presses and molds to shape their pieces before finishing and glazing them by hand.



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Jeremiah Munoz fills molds with liquid clay in Clay in Motion's production facility in Milton-Freewater on March 11, 2020.

baked in the dish. Every piece made at Clay in Motion also has the Neher name and the year the piece was made lightly etched into the bottom.

Jeff said he checks eBay for Clay in Motion items and has sometimes found people selling pieces from the early 1980s, which his dad occasionally collects.

"It's kind of funny to be buying his own pottery back," he said.

The business' most popular item is the handwarmer mug, which allows the holder to curl their hand inside a warm, protective layer of clay as they hold it.



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Ceramic cowboy boots sit in a bin for sale at Clay in Motion in Milton-Freewater on March 11, 2020.

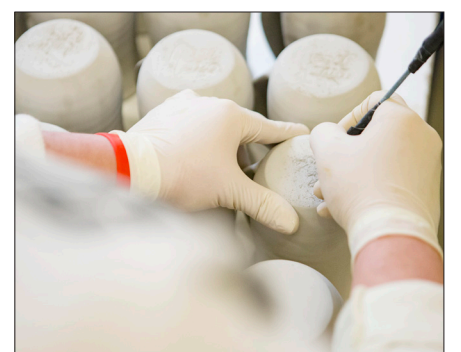
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It comes in both right- and left-hand versions.

Shipping stoneware across the country comes with some risk, but they have their own bubble wrap-making machine, and they use it liberally.

"We had a custom box designed that fits six of our mugs, so when they ship they're pretty tight," Jeff said.



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Maria Mendez scribes a signature into the bottom of each mug before it is glazed.