

Consuming Pots:

Listening to Mark Hewitt's Customers

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He really is an incredible phenomenon, that he can produce the quantity and quality of the work that he does, three times a year like this. I mean, there's not many other art forms where . . . you can be that prolific but consistently that good.

—Diane Kibbe, Carrboro, NC

DIANE KIBBE AND HER FAMILY moved to Carrboro from south Texas about five years ago. An avid pottery collector since her college days, Diane arrived in North Carolina without any knowledge of local ceramics. "When I got here," she recalls, "I was looking for a house. And I came into the house where I'm actually living now, and the first thing I saw was one of Mark's large pots. . . . I had *never* seen a stoneware pot that large. I'd seen some large Mexican pots, but they're soft clay. They're different. So she [the owner] said, 'Well, there's this young potter . . . in Pittsboro who has a kiln opening three times a year . . .'"

Perhaps because she admired the big planter, Diane quickly purchased her new home. "The pot didn't go with the house," she laments, but she soon headed south to Pittsboro. "It was a spring opening, I remember. And I thought, 'Well, I'll get there around ten to nine; surely that'll be enough time.' [Laughs] . . . And I'm a pretty undaunted shopper, and I was just stunned by the numbers and the way people were scooping things up and making piles. And I realized very quickly that this was bigger, this was more than what I had thought. And from that moment on, I don't think I've missed a kiln opening."

Diane's shock—first at encountering one of Mark's behemoths and then in experiencing the vigorous competition of a kiln opening—is shared by many others who have become regular customers. During their fourteen years in North Carolina, Carol and Mark Hewitt have developed a remarkably successful business and a huge clientele. To announce each opening, they now send out more than three thousand postcards. This raises the question: Just how has an English potter managed to thrive in a state already renowned for its pottery traditions? In an earlier catalogue, I suggested that Mark was "preadapted to settle in North Carolina"—that is, that "his earlier training and attitudes" made it "almost inevitable that he would end up here as an integral part of the North Carolina pottery tradition." In the same catalogue, Mark affirmed that "the traditional pots of North Carolina have many of the same qualities as pots that I admire. . . . I am drawn to pots that are generic and universal. I like simple folk pots made in large quantities, using local materials that have been fired in wood kilns" ("Stuck," 13).



It is quite easy to see the strong connection between Mark's work and that of North Carolina potters from Seagrove and the Catawba Valley. In fact, Mark's warm appraisal of the qualities of folk pots constitutes an excellent self-description. Ultimately, however, Mark's success has come from his customers, who rise at dawn on a Saturday morning several times a year to attend his kiln openings. For some, there is the thrill of the chase. "It's just about as much excitement as I can get on a Saturday morning," declares Ken Davidson, who drives over in the darkness from Asheboro. For others, it is the opportunity to socialize with fellow pottery aficionados. At a recent opening, Tanya Froeber observed people with "folding chairs and tables. And they had their thermoses of coffee—they were sharing pastries and coffee." Mark's customers, according to Diane Kibbe, "love the setting and the opportunity to share in a different way of being consumers."

Although the process of consumption is undeniably attractive—many also enjoy the rural excursion to Mark and Carol's "farm"—the pots themselves are what draw the customers. To understand their appeal, I interviewed seven of Mark's regular customers, chosen from a larger list that he provided. All were very articulate and showed remarkable agreement on the qualities that they admired.

In a recent article on fellow potter Svend Bayer, Mark has written that "we must make pots that reach for the highest possible aesthetic qualities while ensuring that they remain accessible to repeated, simple use" ("Svend," 50). Without exception, Mark's customers praise his work precisely because it unites beauty and utility. Amy Tornquist, owner of the Sage and Swift catering company, characterizes Mark's wares as "a meeting of form and function. They're beautiful. They make the food look pretty because of the colors. When they're by themselves they look great. And then they don't break." Somehow, I suspect that most pottery made today is either useful or artistic. We use inexpensive, often mass-produced forms as part of our daily life and then purchase "art" wares to adorn our homes. These are usually tucked away in cupboards or set on shelves or mantels, where they are admired but rarely handled. Mark's great achievement has been to create a limited range of common forms—plates, mugs, pitchers, bowls, teapots, jars, planters—that we appreciate using. As Connie Burwell explains, "I enjoy cooking and doing things much more when what I'm doing it with is not just something stamped and rolled off an assembly line. . . . If I'm going to put my all into it and it's going to have feeling, then I like to do it with things that are made that way and have feeling." Integral to life's daily tasks, Mark's pots evoke pleasure in use; they are a constant delight to the hand and the eye.

Like the folk pottery of North Carolina, Mark's forms have an intimate association with foods. However, where the old jars, jugs, milk crocks, and churns were primarily intended for storage, the contemporary forms are designed for food preparation and consumption. And they are made to be seen and admired while they are used. Beth Cushman uses a small pitcher "every single day [to] pour cream in, or maple syrup. And I just love looking at it sitting on my kitchen table. . . . It just has a really clean line to it and pours very well." Amy Tornquist has taken on one of Mark's newest forms, his fish platter—a flat, highly textured slab on small

feet that she likens to "skateboards. I put little canapés on them. . . . I put a little green base, some sort of dill or fennel or something on the bottom. And then I made these tuna Niçoise canapés with a new potato on the bottom with a grilled piece of tuna and some tomato sauce on top. And they were really pretty, and they looked really neat on that tray."

Horticultural wares, such as flowerpots and wall pockets, are also an old part of the folk potter's repertory; in fact, the former often turn up in archaeological excavations of seventeenth century Virginia sites. Mark's forms are, by comparison, much larger, but they are also used in and around people's homes to provide natural beauty. Tanya Froeber has a collection of the large planters. "I use them in the garden, and I use them as planters in the house for some of my large trees." This past summer she had a "water garden" on her porch, with terra-cotta pots and "other pieces that I've collected from other stores." In the center of this grouping she placed one large planter. "And it was just lovely; it was kind of like the centerpiece." Diane Kibbe is a professional landscape and garden designer who uses the large forms to create living sculptures. One she is currently planning will be set in "a woodland area, and I'm hoping to use a tall umbrella pot and one of the forty-five-pound [planters]—these are both black pots that I have. And a third element—in my mind I see some kind of a rusted metal sculptural piece that would work with them. And then plant these. Plant Mark's pots and plant around them, so they look like they're sort of growing out of the earth. But highly refined, very organic matter growing out of the earth."

Two oft-cited qualities related to the usefulness of Mark's pots are their size and durability. Diane Kibbe is drawn to pots "that are either a magnificent size and scale or very small. And so the size of Mark's pots is very magnetic to me. But I think I understand enough about pottery just to be overwhelmed by the skill that he has in achieving that size." It is easy to overlook the extraordinary range of Mark's work, from diminutive sugars and creamers to planters and covered jars weighing well over one hundred pounds. It does require enormous skill to produce even, rounded forms and thin walls at either end of this scale. Most potters, by contrast, work within a narrow range of sizes. Granted, it might take an Amazon to hoist one of Mark's two-gallon pitchers full of iced tea. So Tanya Froeber fills hers with fresh-cut flowers. But for caterer Amy Tornquist, the bigger the better. "I did a luncheon for 260 people. And we used the bowls. And they do about 70, you know, fruit salad for 70. One bowl, because they're huge." She does acknowledge that most people might hang them, as Mark does on the outside of his barn, but adds, "We're not about hanging—we're about using."

All of Mark's pots are made of stoneware, a high-fired clay body that is extremely hard and vitreous. They are fired for two days in his massive wood kiln until they reach maturity at around 2,400°F. No one knows the value of their durability better than Amy Tornquist. "We've used commercial platters, porcelain platters, and pottery that's mostly commercial stuff, and . . . we break white platters like you can't [believe]. And they chip like mad. I mean, how many doilies can you put on a platter before you have to throw it out?" Mark's pots, on the other hand, "are high quality, and they don't really break." A similar concern applies to the horticulture wares. "Pots are really hard to use outdoors," explains Diane Kibbe, "because they're

not very durable." But she has devised a way to line Mark's planters "with styrofoam to create an expansion joint. And I've used them in protected areas, . . . and so far we haven't had any losses."

For all their usefulness, it is the essential beauty of Mark's pots that entices many customers. Sally Whitmore has a "huge collection of bowls—nobody needs this many bowls. But they're just such lovely shapes and have nice colors and patterns. And you just say, 'Oh, I've got to have another; I need that bowl!'" Many will doubtless empathize with Sally's "need" and agree with her on the multiple appeal of Mark's wares. "I like the colors, and I like the textures of many of the glazes that he uses. Some of the shapes of the pieces, I think, are perfectly elegant." Without exception, Mark's colors are subdued and earthy—streaky browns, matte blacks, and mottled grays—and the muted textures are often modified by unpredictable flashings and flows through the kiln. Where she once preferred "perfect" pots, Connie Burwell has come to love "the way the kiln does—the imperfections, the drips, the ashes, just what happens to the clay itself." Above all, "the form is classic. It's not full of doodahs and frills. It's just very honest and very simple and very functional."

Color, texture, form—these are the facets of Mark's pottery most commonly cited, and they are linked by a common aesthetic of simplicity and restraint. "We get a lot of compliments," allows Amy Tornquist. "I think it says a lot about the kind of caterer I am, that this is the kind of pottery I use. It's pretty, and it's functional, and it's not prissy. . . . There's something about it that's almost humble. It's lovely, but there's something kind of simple and honest." Not everyone, however, finds these qualities appealing. Diane Kibbe recalls a visitor who "came to my house and saw these pots, and she said, 'Oh, they're so crude!' I was really taken aback by that, because I'd never thought of them as crude. . . . I think for her crude was the lack of overt ornamentation, or the subtlety of the glazes." And even Amy Tornquist finds times when she can't cater with her mega-bowls and fish platters. "We use some silver trays, because some of our clients are a little too . . . country club for Mark's pots. See, Chapel Hill, that's not the case, but if you've ever been to Durham, Hope Valley doesn't do anything that's not silver."

In a lengthy essay on the nature of folk art, Henry Glassie writes that "pure form perhaps most purely embodies beauty. The gaudy, tawdry painted chest clamors for attention. The plain and perfectly proportioned chest waits serenely to stun the subtler eye with its radiance and coherence." Substitute planter or bowl or pitcher for chest, and Glassie's dictum illuminates Mark's genius. To some, perhaps, his pottery seems crude because it lacks the surface ornamentation, the elaborate decoration that is often regarded as the *sine qua non* for art. But to others, those with the subtler eye, his graceful forms, enhanced by their natural colors and textures, represent a seemingly effortless combination of beauty and functionality. Not surprisingly, many North Carolinians have chosen, like Connie Burwell and her family, to "use Mark's pottery as a yardstick. We'll be looking at a piece, and if it's trying to do too much or it's too busy, my husband . . . will say, 'You know, it doesn't look like Mark's.' We'd rather have a piece of Mark's. And so we'll just kind of sit back and go, 'Yeah, yeah, I think we'll wait and get a piece of Mark's.'"

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