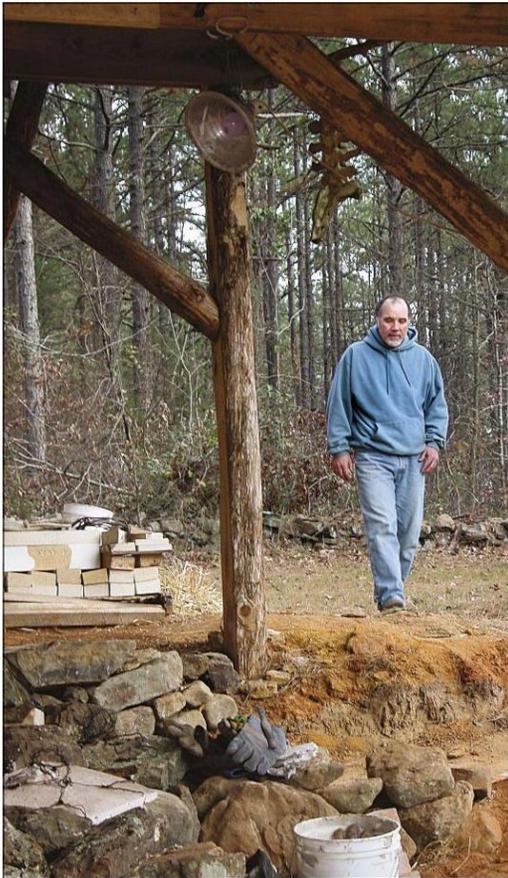


# Fire and passion

Potter Joe Bruhin's love for an ancient technique took his art to new heights



Joe Bruhin, Stone County potter, paces anxiously outside a traditional style of Japanese kiln he built, waiting while it gradually cools inside from 2,500 degrees after its first firing.

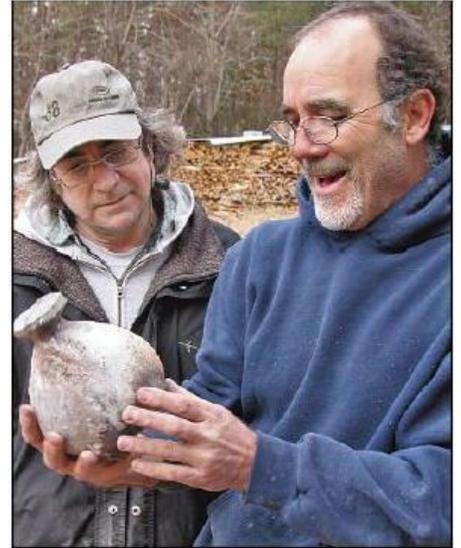
**BY MARCIA SCHNEDLER ARKANSAS  
DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE**

**FOX —** A decade ago, potter Joe Bruhin fell in love at first sight with someone else's pot. All it took was seeing the vessel's small photograph in a magazine.

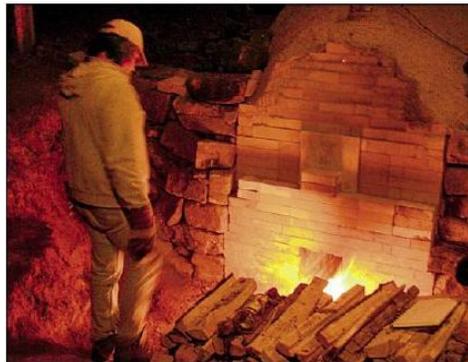
Bruhin succumbed even though the image was black-and-white, lacking the nuances of color most people need to respond to the texture and depth of emotion that any fine piece of art can evoke.

But Bruhin is a nationally recognized potter whose increasing stature will bring him a oneman show at the Arkansas Arts Center in March 2007. And this pot spoke to him.

"I thought, 'This pot has got some presence, and this is something coming genuinely from the heart,'" he says. The pot wasn't pretty. It was powerful.

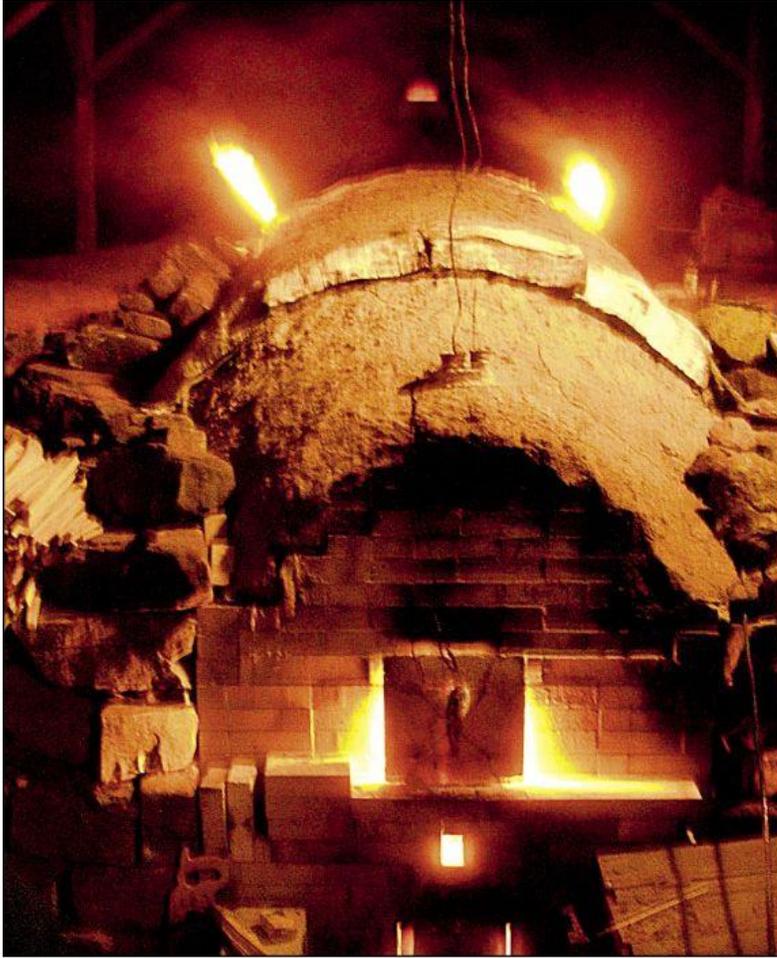


That experience eventually led the Stone County ceramist to reach farther back into the traditions of Far Eastern pottery than previously to build the same type of kiln in which the masterful pot had been fired. Called an anagama, this style of wood-fired kiln is thought to have first existed 1,200 years or more ago in China.



In November, Bruhin first fired his new anagama, also known as a cave or hole kiln, and the results will be on view and for sale this weekend at the Little Rock home of Claudia and Dr. Walt Stallings.

He hopes for second and possibly third anagama firings before his Arts Center exhibition.



The pot that led to Bruhin's anagama had been created by Shiho Kanzaki, a sensei (master) ceramist from Shigaraki, one of Japan's six original pottery-making centers starting in medieval times.

In the 17th century, though, anagama kilns in Shigaraki were being replaced by another kind, called noborigama, built with vaults and chambers. Noborigamas could be larger than anagamas. They also produced more predictable and reliable results, thus turning out greater amounts of Shigaraki's increasingly popular glazed ware.

Kanzaki, 63, was among the pioneers in the revival of anagama construction and firings. His works were more textured than others', according to potter and author Dick Lehman in *Ceramics Monthly*.

Kanzaki's path to pottery wasn't easy. His father had wanted him to become a lawyer. But while studying for the bar examination, he realized that pottery, with what it offered him psychologically and artistically, was what he had to do.

Bruhin, 53, traveled another route to pottery. He began taking classes three decades ago at a Missouri junior college on the GI Bill, including courses in pottery.

"I just stuck with it," he says. He went to the Sun Valley Center for Arts & Humanities in Idaho. "I stayed for two years with a series of visiting teachers and built a wood-fired kiln there."

Bruhin traveled and lived in Europe, North Africa and Asia with his wife and son, then in 1986 moved to 40 forested acres outside Fox. There he built the oak and stone house where he still lives, his pottery studio and a three-chambered noborigama kiln.

"What I basically wanted to do when I first came down here was fire [the kiln] maybe four times a year, not spend much time on my work, keep things inexpensive," Bruhin says. "I just couldn't."

After his second noborigama firing, Alan DuBois, retired curator of decorative arts at the Arkansas Arts Center, visited his studio.

"After that, some people started knowing me and started to pat me on the back," Bruhin says, "so I decided that the only way I could make a living was quality work rather than a lot of it."

Firing his noborigama kiln generally required 60 to 100 hours of stoking the fireboxes, not to mention preparation time creating the pottery and splitting leftover wood bought from mills or logs from thinned-out trees on his property.

Out of that kiln came works recognized nationally and named best-of-show in several juried and invitational museum and gallery exhibitions. Their images have been published in books and magazines. In 1993, Bruhin received an Arkansas Arts Council Fellowship Award.

But after he'd fallen in love with the Kanzaki pot, he began close investigation of the type of kiln in which it had been produced. He visited a number of U.S. potters who were using anagamas.



Kanzaki had supervised the building of an anagama by his assistants at the request of ceramist Karl Beamer, an art professor at Bloomsburg University in Pennsylvania. Bruhin spent two weeks there for a firing of the kiln to celebrate its 10th anniversary over New Year's of 2004. Kanzaki was there. So Bruhin was able to meet the master and discuss details of anagama construction.

Bruhin returned to Stone County and began building his kiln with the assistance of New Brunswick potter Lee Clark, whom he'd met in Bloomsburg. The anagama took 4,000 fire bricks and 2 1/2 months to complete, also requiring organic clay, a snug covering of dirt, a sand floor and an open-sided shed to cover it.

Anagamas take many forms. Bruhin's is 36 feet long and rises at an angle of 30 degrees to the chimney.

"Most wood kilns are on an 18-degree-or-under slope; some have only a 3-degree slope. So a 30-degree slope is pretty dramatic," Bruhin says.

Inside, behind the series of steps with floor-to-ceiling shelves on which the pottery is placed, is a back wall. "I think this slows the flame down," he says. "You don't want the flame to be really rushing through there. But you do want a nice strong draw." The temperature inside the kiln ultimately reaches 2,500 degrees or more.

Its firebox, on the lower end, measures 4 feet by 5.5 feet and is divided into two levels that "... allow directing the strengths of drafts and flames so that you can work on certain pieces or areas inside," Bruhin says.

It took him two months to prepare 16 cords of wood for last fall's first firing (12 were used, about the same amount he burns to heat his home and studio for three years). He uses yellow pine — the closest North American relative to the red pine used in Shigaraki. He split and stacked the pieces to dry to the proper degree, no longer than eight to 12 months.

Bruhin used six types of clay in his pieces, which ranged from small tea bowls and vases through large pots. The combination of clays in each item relates to the spot where the piece is placed within the kiln.

"It's like playing chess in there," Bruhin says. "Sometimes it takes 15 to 20 minutes to place one piece. But that has a lot to do with the outcome, and I want a painting. Fire bounces from one piece to another — outside, inside, behind, over, under." Bruhin also places pieces within the firebox where they are subject to the most ferocious flames, heat, ash and coals; not all those using anagamas do so.

The 10-day firing proved intensive. "When you fire a kiln, the world stops," Bruhin says. "At least for me." The fire requires constant attendance and concentration. Bruhin was assisted by Clark along with Montreal filmmaker Claude Gagnon and cinematographer and film editor Takako Miyahira, whom Bruhin also had met in Bloomsburg. They had been filming Kanzaki, even participating in his firings, for a future documentary about his life and works, and also used his studio and kilns as backdrop for a recently released award-winning movie, *Kamataki*.

What happens inside the kiln depends on a combination of factors: internal temperature and temperature changes; humidity; barometric pressure; wind velocity; the amount of air in the kiln; the amount of wood in the firebox at any one time; how the grates are tended to; the minerals each tree absorbed as it grew; the clay content of each pot; its location within the kiln — and more, including the educated intuitiveness of the potter.

What results, as another potter says, is a continuous dialogue between the clay and the fire. Ashes melt and drip, creating a natural glaze and patterns. Minerals in the ashes draw together, merging, melting, changing color. Shapes of pots may be altered. Some pieces become elegant; most, ruggedly powerful.

After November's firing, the kiln remained closed as it cooled over eight or nine days. For Bruhin, its unloading created waves of emotion, swinging from rhapsody to despair and heightened by finalization of a divorce days before.

**(He had dedicated the firing to his former wife, Terri).**

**“It might not be correct,” he said as he and Clark slithered inside the kiln to hand out the results, “but for me the only thing that matters is the final piece. If you can’t get anything decent with using all that fuel and cutting down all those trees — well, that’s the bottom line for me.**

**“You’re using that energy to try and make beauty and art, and if it has some transcendental effect on another human being, it’s worth it to me to do that. If you can’t do that, then I can’t see what the point is.”**