

Reflections on Wood Firing

by Terri Bruhin



PHOTOS: TERRI BRUHIN, LARRY MCSPADDEN, BILL PARSONS, KENNY SIMS

For Joe and Terri Bruhin, the rewards of wood firing are well worth the time and effort required to stoke three chambers to Cone 12 over a period of 2 to 4 days.

It is only a few days before the firing. Joe's attention has been focused toward this event for weeks now. Choosing pots from amongst a myriad of forms, deciding and executing any glaze or oxide work, strategically placing each in the kiln for maximum effect, and bricking up three doors require a tremendous amount of time and effort. This twice-a-year ritual—the firing of a wood-burning, noborigama-type kiln—seems all encompassing.

Once the fire is kindled, the kiln will be the center of our joint universe for anywhere from 2 to 4 days, 24 hours a day. Neither of us will have time to do anything else, or think of anything else, until all three chambers have been stoked to around Cone 12.

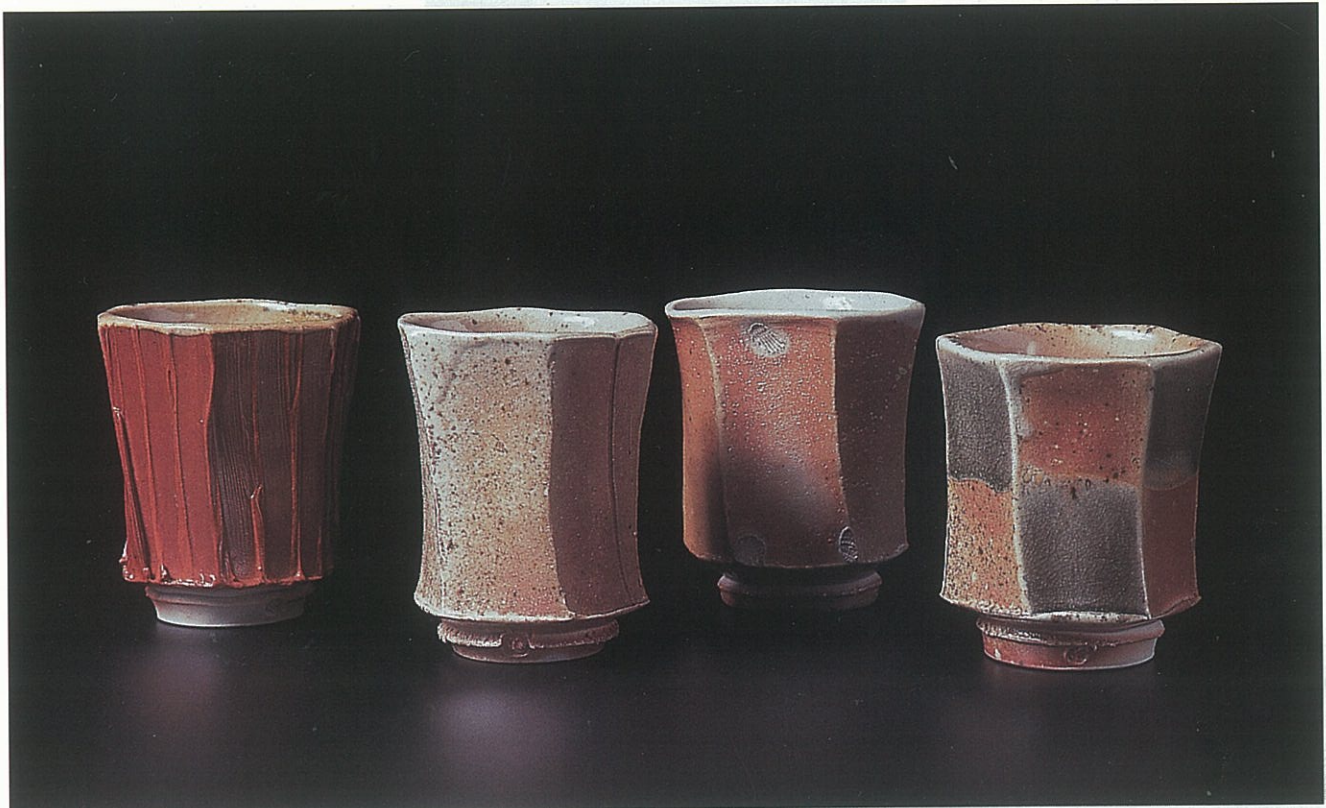
Afterward, we have a few days of resting and waiting, then the open kiln reveals the fruit of months of work. This special time always seems to have the feel of “a moment of truth” to it. We, full of wonder and expectations, are especially vulnerable to the raw power that pours out of the doorways, brick by brick. Sometimes whoops of joy fill the air; sometimes groans of anguish. Whichever, the pots must be quickly inspected and cleaned, boxed up and carried off to market, the anguish and joy still fresh in our minds.

What is it that makes wood firing so different from gas, electric, raku or even salt firing? Surely it is more than just the resulting surface effects. The flashing and ash deposits are very beautiful, but there seems to be more at stake here than just a pretty face.

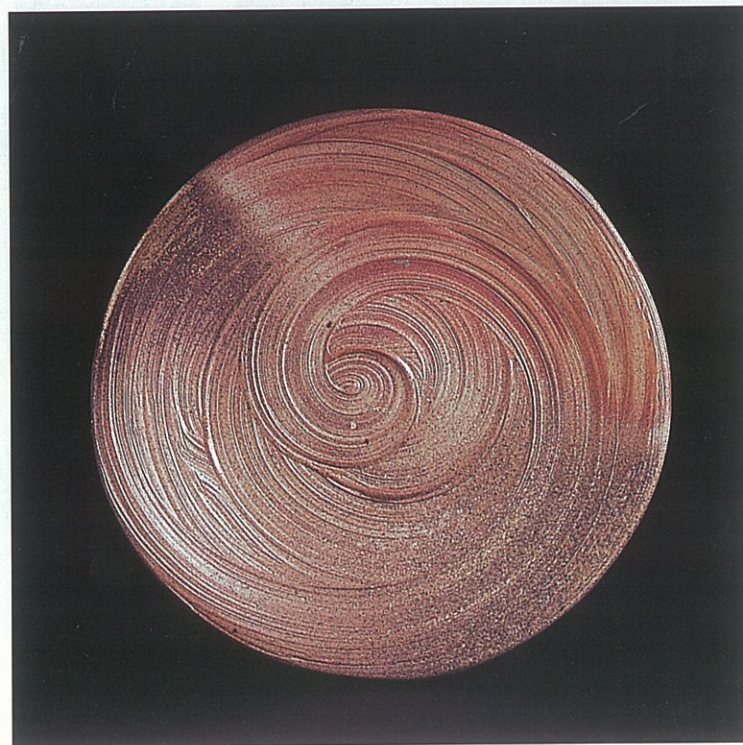
We were told that we wouldn't be able to sell this type of pottery at craft and art fairs, but we do. We enjoy the one-on-one interaction with the people who eventually take these pots home. We can gauge their reactions and feel their response first hand.

Of course, wood-fired ware may not sell as well as some other types of pottery. But sell it does. And the people who do respond to its subtle, quiet and deep variations tend to react as would a person who has not eaten for a week when suddenly presented with a bowl of steaming minestrone and a loaf of freshly baked bread. These people are starving, but what for?

There is a lot that could be said about the shallowness and meaninglessness of most people's lives. Our modern existence is filled with antiseptic environs, smooth surfaces and cushioned spaces; it pulsates with vibrant colors and sounds shot from all directions. Wood-fired pottery seems to be the



Wheel-thrown and faceted porcelain cups, 4½ inches in height, with glazed interiors and primarily unglazed exteriors, wood fired to Cone 10–12.



White stoneware platter, 16 inches in diameter, wheel thrown, with brushed slip, flashing and fly ash deposits, fired to Cone 10–12.

antithesis of our modern-day lifestyle. Instead of bright colors, there are soft, gritty neutrals or deeply saturated earthtones. Instead of smooth surfaces, there are textures and nuance. Instead of rigid symmetry, there is sensuous and playful movement.

Some people who are attracted to wood-fired pottery like it because it looks ancient. Others find its strong form and rich, deep color masculine and invigorating. Still others are entranced with the process itself, particularly our lack of control over just how the fire will interact with the clay. Whatever the attraction, these people seem elated with the discovery of Joe's wood-fired pottery, as if they had been walking alone in the woods for a long time and suddenly



Covered jar, 12 inches in height, wheel-thrown stoneware with slip, flashing and fly ash deposits.

came upon a fellow traveler walking in the same direction.

This journey, one in search of a deep experience, seems to be the binding tie between Joe and the people who purchase his work. Here, the kiln itself becomes a temple or shrine—a portal that connects buyer and potter together with the elemental forces of nature, and all that they have to teach.

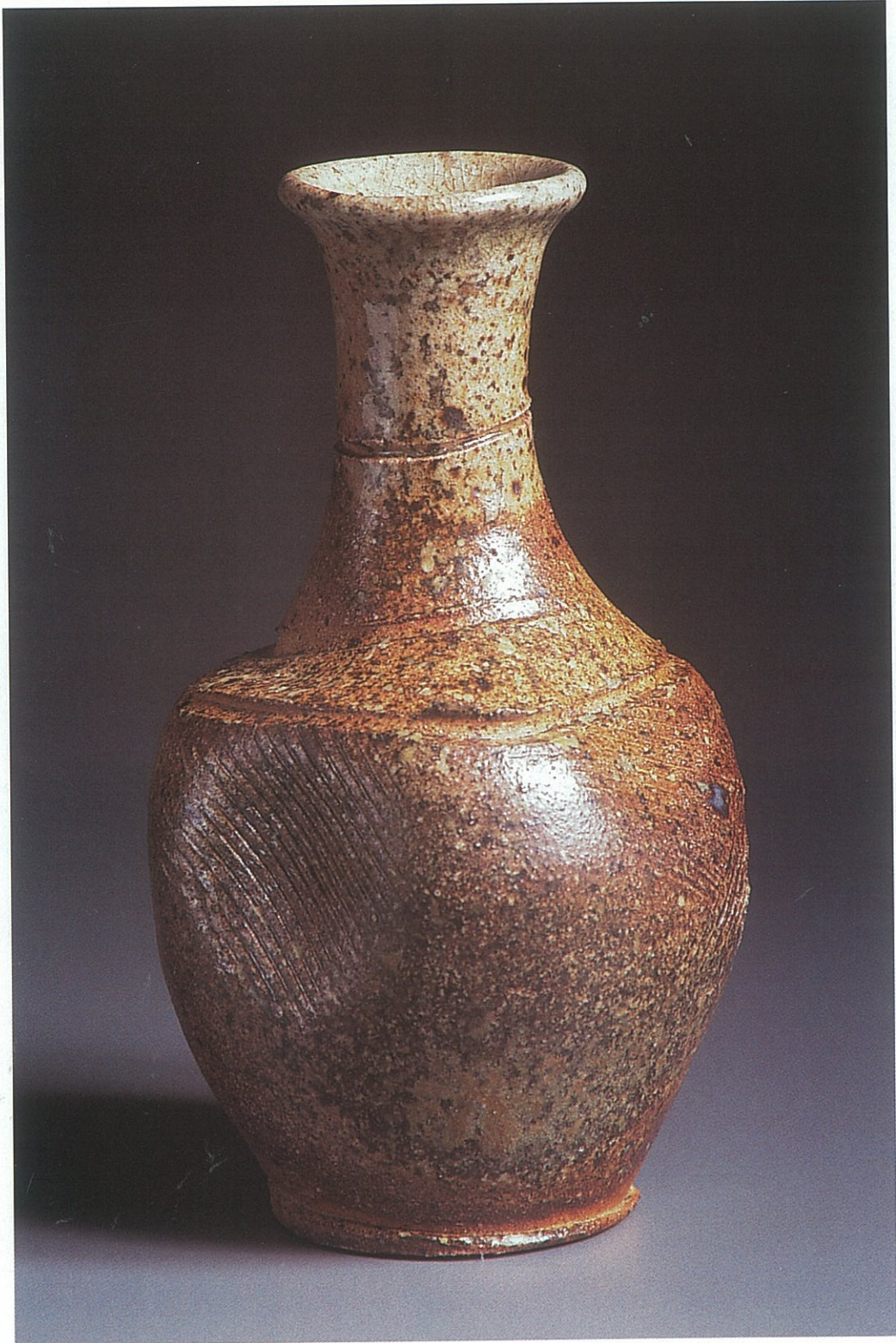
No idle toy, the kiln presents the possibility for serious exploration. It offers a cumulative experience—the better we learn to listen and watch, the more we can give it what it requires, and the greater the rewards it returns. These rewards are then shared with those sensitive souls who come to behold and observe, to touch



Ready to fire: all three chambers are loaded, then the doors are bricked and sealed with a mixture of clay and sand.



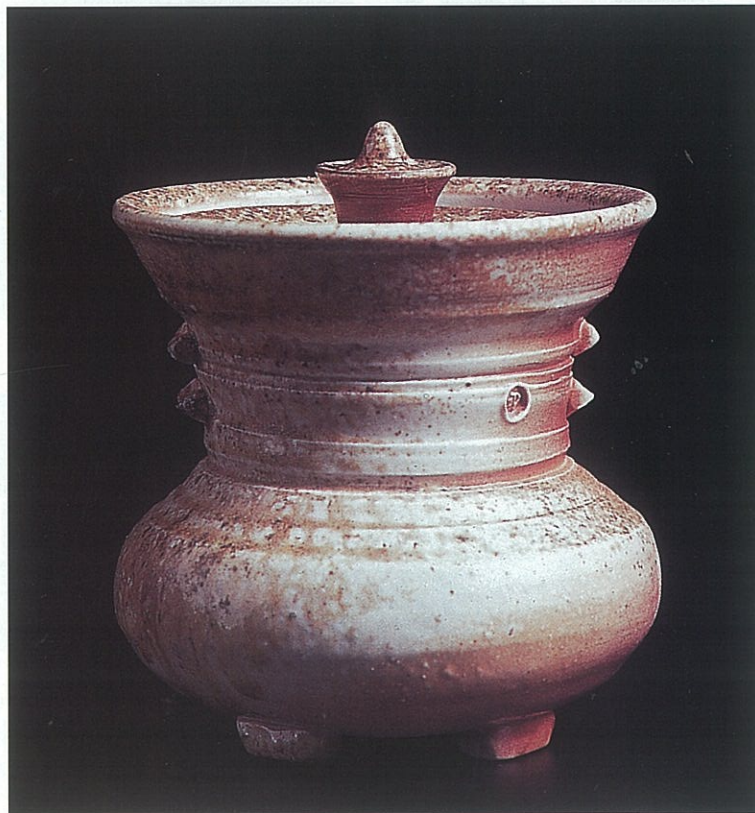
Metal framework braces the walls and arches of the Bruhins' three-chambered climbing kiln.



Unglazed stoneware bottle, 7 inches in height, wheel thrown, paddled and incised, with wood-firing ash deposits and flashing.



Faceted covered jar, 7 inches in height, wheel-thrown porcelain with slip, Shino glaze and oxide decoration, wood fired to Cone 10-12.

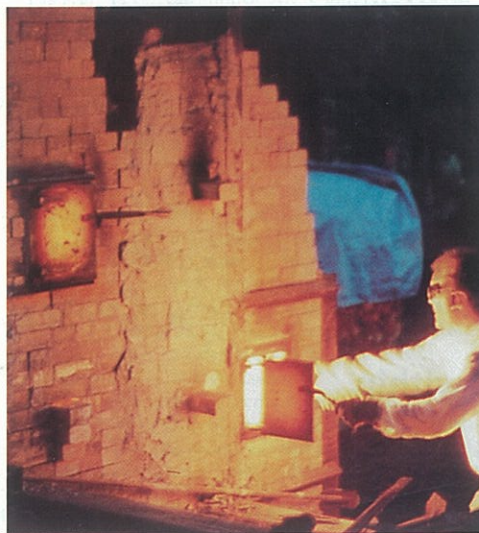


Unglazed white stoneware covered jar, 6 inches high, with flashing and fluxed fly ash from the Cone 10–12 wood firing, by Joe Bruhin, Fox, Arkansas.

and caress the pots they will happily take home.

As a result, we have chosen to bend our backs in service to this natural beauty. We would no more try to control this wood-fired kiln than we would try to put a lion in a closet. Consequently, it binds us to the natural world; it allows us to touch that raw, wild side of our natures; and it gives us the pleasure of looking briefly into its glowing interior, where a river of white fire dances through as the wood ash gleams like diamonds.

In *Iron John*, Robert Bly reminds us that our passion urges us to choose something precious, and to pay for it in whatever way necessary: poverty, pain, conflict, deprivation or labor. For us, wood firing has seemed to require all. But the wonder and



Bruhin stoking the firebox of the first chamber at white heat.

beauty returned keep prodding us forward. And it enables communication with others who yearn to plumb the depths of being and experience.

Even a simple cup—used in one of our more enduring rituals, morning coffee—can communicate the deepest emotions. There, as steam rises from the cup's mouth, as the user's lips touch the lip of the cup and a sip of coffee is savored by the user's tongue, as the hands grasp the form and fingers touch surface texture that the potter's fingers have placed there, and the eye delights in the subtle variation of glaze, flashing, and ash deposit, a deep connection on a seemingly ancient level is made. Then, and only then, is this pot completed, and room made for others to be born. ▲