

Topic: Something from the Oven

Making Pottery  
*by Liz Gibbons*

In 2008 as I was recovering from emergency abdominal surgery performed four days after a partial hip replacement, a chiropractor I knew thought that doing something with my hands would be a beneficial activity during my recovery. One of his patients, Nancy Apple, made pottery. She was about my age and had agreed to teach me. I only had to pay for the supplies I used. I accepted the offer. Nancy and her husband's home was nestled among many trees on a large lot. They had converted a small barn behind their home into a studio for Nancy to pursue her pottery making and sometimes teach classes. We met almost every Tuesday morning for several months. During that time she taught me the basic techniques of making pottery without using a wheel, although one day she instructed me in the use of the wheel so I would have a feel for it. Actually a wheel produces symmetrical forms only, which your hands cannot do. But your hands can create all sorts of shapes and interesting decorative touches. I had felt that I was going to be imposing on her time, but it worked out to her benefit too. She was making a set of dishes for a grandchild who was getting married in a few months. Our Tuesday get-togethers insured that she spent some time on that project. So as I experimented with whatever technique she had taught me that day, she would make bowls, cups, and plates using the wheel.

Our first lesson was getting a feel for the clay. We worked it in various ways. The first object I made was a small bowl. It was a little lopsided looking. As the weeks went on I learned various hand building techniques, and my abilities began to improve. I also experimented with a variety of tools to make impressions in the clay. Over the months I made many different items including a shallow bowl shaped like a leaf complete with leaf veins, a small serving platter shaped and detailed to look like a fish, a tall cylindrical shaped flower vase, and several small whimsical shaped bowls with lids to store small items on a desk or in a bathroom. I also made a container to hold a plant that could be hung on a wall and a decorative plaque with an uplifting quote.

Finally, Nancy had enough pottery to fill her kiln which was fairly large. She instructed me on how to add glazes and color to the items I had made. It was fun to play with those. Then all our pottery was put in the kiln to be fired. This was a process that took more than a day to complete. The kiln had to be heated slowly to a temperature, if I recall correctly, of 2,000 degrees or higher. The pottery had to remain at this high temperature for a certain amount of time, and then the kiln had to cool down slowly. I think Nancy even went to the studio in the middle of the night to make sure the process was progressing correctly. It was exciting to see the finished pieces as we removed them from the kiln. Some of the glazes I used were very nice; some colors were surprising. I am grateful to Nancy for her role in my recovery. Learning to make pottery was a relaxing, creative, and very enjoyable experience.