

# Wine Jar Journey

Update on the Wine Jar (Amphorae), which David Schlapobersky and Felicity Potter are making at Bukkenburg Pottery in Swellendam.

Following on from a trial run on an order for a limited number of wine jars or 'Amphorae', in 2009 (see National Ceramics No 87, Autumn 2009), and the successful maturing of wine in them over the past three years, David and Felicity have now embarked on the next stage of this ambitious commission and at this point several of these large pots are drying in the studio.

Using ceramic jars for the maturing of wine is an age-old process going back thousands of years, beginning in the Middle East, pre-dating even the use of oak barrels for this part of the wine making process. They are still being made in the original way in the Republic of Georgia. Traditionally they were made in earthenware.

There has been renewed interest in recent years in ceramic jars being used for maturing wine, particularly in the wine producing regions of California in the USA, and more recently, right here in South Africa.

More information and pictures of the first part of the project can be seen on David and Felicity's Website on this page: [http://www.pottery.co.za/wine\\_jars.htm](http://www.pottery.co.za/wine_jars.htm)

These large jars are hand-made and David throws them on the potter's wheel in several stages using a gas blowtorch to stiffen the stages as he goes, often taking up to two days on the wheel to complete each jar. The pots are made using their own blend of grogged stoneware clay, and the inside of the wine jars have been coated with a slip made of clay dug on the farm where the grapes for the wine were grown.

The drying process on work of this size is critical and needs to be carried out very slowly and evenly to prevent cracking and warping or distorting. Once the jars are off the wheel and loaded onto a trolley, they are covered with large plastic bags for several weeks in order to control the speed of drying. After a month inside the studio the jars are wheeled out on their trolleys under the lean-to behind the studio, the bags removed and the jars allowed to dry naturally under cover and in the shade for another 4 weeks before loading the kiln for the first firing.

For the first or bisque firing, the pots are fired to 1 000°C over a period of about 10 hours in a more or less neutral atmosphere, with a very, very slow preheat period of at least 4 days before the firing even begins.

The jars are sprayed with a light coating of a khaki green glaze on the outside from the shoulder to the top including the handles. The body of the jars and the insides are left unglazed in order to encourage interaction between the fired clay, the clay from the vineyard, and the wine as it matures in the jars.

The glaze firing in their oil-fired (paraffin) kiln is to a top temperature of 1 320°C, Orton Cone 12, in about 10 hours with reduction taking place for about 3 1/2 hours.

The pots weigh about 80kg when wet and hold an average of 150 litres of wine each.



*Above, collaring the neck on a large wine jar; and below, thrown wine jar; 'Amphora' 1 200mm tall, now with handles, ready to come off the wheel.*



In their unfired state they stand about 1 200mm tall and because of their size and weight, David could not possibly move them on his own and they are most grateful to their friend Myburgh de Wet who attends David's Wednesday evening pottery class and who is always willing to lend a hand when needed.

This part of the commission requires making 18 large Amphorae or Wine Jars, and as anyone who is involved with the making of pottery or ceramics knows, the task is not complete until the work has been successfully fired and put into use by the new owners!

The next steps of this project will be carried in later editions of National Ceramics.

An extraordinary amount of work!

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