

TASTER SESSIONS

Basic and practice taster sessions

This is something to read through at your leisure. It is not essential reading... however this will walk you through the whole experience and if you can take the time to read it you may find it really enhances your actual experience on the day.

Let me invite you to walk you through what happens during a taster course. It should make your time more efficient, easy to understand and ultimately more enjoyable and rewarding. It will take about ten to fifteen minutes to read. It is not essential reading so don't worry if reading isn't your thing. Just come along and everything will be explained.

Most people coming to a taster course will never have made a pot before but I know from experience that many people, having tried one taster course, come back for several more.

The main thing is to just go with the flow and enjoy the experience. There is no such thing as a failed pot...we call it a practice pot! However, we make sure you will end up with something you will be able to use every day. Generally, we aim to make a bowl...because they are the easiest and most natural shapes to form on the wheel.

If the taster course gets you hooked, then you can steer yourself towards a lifetime of further interesting tangents. There is, seriously, no end to the pottery learning experience.

I am going to direct this 'walk through' to folks who have **never** made a pot but even those with some experience may find it interesting.

For the most part, at the very beginning, **most** people will want to have a go at 'Throwing' a pot on the wheel and I imagine nearly everyone knows what that means. The TV programme the 'Great Pottery throwdown' has made the whole pottery thing very popular. Throwing on the wheel is probably the most iconic image of a potter at work but throwing is just one method. There are many others. The wheel needs practice. No one will be able to perfectly control the clay at their first attempt...although some folk are naturally a little more adept than others it is not a competition.

When you come to a basic taster class you can choose to have a go on the wheel... or not...you may just want to try something simple like pinching a pot but most of the taster class's are designed to have a go on one of our marvellous Shimpo wheels. They are the best wheels on the planet...smooth and easy to use. Made in Japan for professionals.

We also have a unique master teaching wheel. Check out our Instagram where you will see this master wheel in action.

I would suggest that before you come to your taster session you flick through a few 'you tube videos.' We are putting together a whole list of ones we love and we will share links to those shortly on the web site.

If you haven't done so already you might like to use Instagram...search for something like :learning to throw pots on a wheel' Warning...you may get addicted!

We have also made a couple of our **own** starter videos and you can access this by going to [link]

Let's start by talking you through what happens on a taster class.

We start with a brief but essential introduction about etiquette.

Then the teacher/mentor will give you a quick basic demonstration.

For your very first attempt...when you first sit at your own wheel...we will already have prepared your first lump of clay for you. It will have been centered and it is ready to 'throw'

A very brief word. 'Throwing' is the word we use for making pots on a wheel ... actually the word has evolved from the word 'Thrawan' which is a very old word and means to turn...which actually makes more sense.

For the moment I am going to concentrate on what will happen if you choose to go on the wheel.

Now I really do recommend if you are coming to a taster session that you look at this very quick video.

Here is the link.

This just takes you, in just a few minutes through the *basics* of how the wheel works. The wheel itself is very simple.

There is a round table with a spinning wheel on which you centre the clay.

Every pot that is **initially** thrown on the wheel is going to be round.

The **rounder** you can make it the better it will be. The first step to make a pot round is to make your initial lump as roundy and as centred as possible. If it is not centered it will make it much harder. Centering can be tricky for some people but don't panic!

Here is a word of advice.

Your hands are the masters the clay is your servant. Tell your hands what to do. Tell your hands to be still...the clay will conform to the shape of your hands.

I have made several hundred pots in the last few months but as I write this I came from a session on the wheel...my first ten mugs were Ok to good but then I just lost the plot a bit and the centering was uncentering.

I have been through this experience before and so do other potters. Six months ago I signed up for a course to make jugs and the teacher admitted to me that she had to spend the day **before** practicing her centering and throwing...Potting is quite a moody business, if you are anxious it may make it harder...sometimes potters might just give up and try it tomorrow...sometimes you just have to persevere and work through it and carry on and if you are lucky your mood might change...and your anxieties disappear and you suddenly find some magic in your fingers. Who knows. Just relax and have a go. Don't worry. My observation is that every one is a little tremulous and uncertain...this naughty clay just doesn't want to behave! Be patient, If one bit fails by that I mean it turns into a messy splodge do not give it another thought just pipe up and say can I have another lump to play with please! You can have a go with as many lumps as you like.

We aim to make your first experience as positive as possible. We want you to come back and do some more potting for one thing!

In order to try and make this first taster session successful we will probably help you get your clay centered if you are finding it too difficult. Try not to be too proud...there will be time enough to practice all these basics later if you are so inclined.

Our basics taster beginners experience has one basic aim...you will get a beaker/ mug or bowl [or if you are lucky and above averagely talented maybe one of each.]

A hand thrown stoneware mug is surprisingly resilient...it might even outlast you...you can dishwasher it indefinitely...These first two items you make are baked to 1240 degrees centigrade...that is so hot steel will have melted long before it reaches that temperature. It's partly why it is called stoneware...it is baked to be as tough as a stone on the pebbly beach...

Centering...think about it...meditation is about centering.

The still centre of the turning wheel that is the centre of everything.

Being at the centre of something is being at its core.

The main thing at work when you are centering is **centrifugal** force...no need to get technical...its just the effect you get from spinning something...indeed spinning anything...the earth spins round the sun ...everything is spinning and rather wonderfully the universe is kept in balance by all the different elements and things spinning at different velocities and weights and oh boy are you going to love this because many people experience their first thrown pot like being at one with the nature of the earth itself...clay spinning...

The earth is mostly klay anyway, klay is silica. And that is the most common element of the earth's crust...] so there it is, the reason why we love the feeling in our hands of a lump of moist klay spinning between our hands.

I changed the spelling of clay to klay to challenge your perceptions and to make it new and modern.

Now for various reasons, many people, especially on their very first attempt, find it quite hard to centre this spinning lump of clay properly and by properly I mean it needs to be spinning like this...

See link

For this reason, we are doing something a ***little bit differently*** at our taster sessions.

Mostly, clay studios and teachers make people start with the basics....they show them how to prepare the clay by 'wedging' it which is almost exactly the same as kneading bread. But this is also an art that needs practice to make perfect.

Then... ***most*** studios get you to try and ***centre*** this clay on your wheel and almost without exception most people find that hard and some people find it near damn impossible and get frustrated. In reality of course there are just different degrees of success and failure, which, in the pottery world, is more or less the same thing.

Having watched so many rank beginners struggle with the wedging and the centering I came up with a different idea.

We will present you with a ready centred piece of clay for your wheel and if you mess that one up we will offer you another.

Yes...later on...should you wish to take this ancient craft any further and shape it to your personality ...then...then you will have to wedge and prepare and center the klay yourself. Some folk want to do the whole process themselves from the get go... that's fine too...we are just there to help.

You will improve if you practice. I have seen a few people get despondent all too quickly but klay is one of those things...if you practice a bit you will ***just get better*** and better. My guess is virtually anyone can, with just a little regular practice become a competent potter.

On the other hand, although you will definitely get better if you practice you will probably also begin to realise how much ***more*** there is to learn. You could spend every day for a lifetime and never produce the same pot twice.

The very first thing you will experience is what it feels like to have a perfectly centred ball of clay spinning round in your hands without any deviations or wobbles...Don't worry, almost everyone, introduces some jelly like wobbles to the spinning lump.

From there we will show you how to start **forming** a pot.

Bowls are definitely the easiest form for a beginner because centrifugal force naturally wants to make your lump of clay into a bowl. **Resisting** the centrifugal force will give you more control.

Basically the first shape you will want to try and form is a cylinder and that is where the fun comes in.

Your first cylinder is guaranteed to be a wobbly uneven thing...and by the way if you come to one of our teaser taster sessions and you manage to make perfect cylinders from the start go then you will end your present employment immediately and I will be employing you **immediately** as one of our apprentice professional potters. That is not a joke by the way.

Prove you can be the Wheelmaster!

No! Don't worry. You will fail to make that **perfect** cylinder! Everyone does...but

The main thing to realise is that the faster you make the wheel turn then the more centrifugal force you are creating and the harder the clay is to control ...on the other hand if you go too slow it won't happen at all...which is why there is a subtle balance between force and speed...don't worry you will experience these theories in real time on your wheel.

We have ten Shippo professional master wheels which are the best in the world... they have no compare and this is a great help because the wheel always moves truly and is very easy to change the speed with a foot pedal...just beware... as your pot grows higher and therefore thinner it is harder to control

Too fast and your first clay pot will, be splattered around the room!

Now some people ...and you may be one of them, will want to try and centre your first bit of clay **yourself**...you didn't come to be molly cuddled...OK. It's your thing and you paid to be here/there.... Maybe you will succeed...I have certainly seen some naturals...the main thing is to tell yourself that **you** are there to control that little lump of clay and not the other way round. There is a tendency when the clay starts to wobble a bit for your hands to follow the wobble.

Start by telling yourself to make that clay behave. Hold your hands still!

Yet, at the same time, we must let the clay tell its story through our hands and our hands must move or no pot will arrive.

We will demonstrate the technique of centering and for this we have a unique teaching aid which is our revolving teacher's wheel.

Video link

Picture

This shows the teacher on their wheel turning around to face each student as needed.

If you are doing OK by yourself, we will probably let you get on with it...but if you are struggling the teacher will turn to face you and you can then practice the procedure together.

The purpose of the taster class is just that...to **taste** the process. An appetiser. Beyond that it is wonderful to have the **tangible** result at the end of it, so we promise that by the end of your session which is generally about three hours, you will have made some functional items which will resemble a bowl or a mug or something in between but any way something 'round' but most importantly something you made.

You will probably have a few collapses/failures and if that is the case then we will help you a bit more...but we won't help you **more than you want** as the main thing is to end up with a pot you feel you made.

Small bowls are **easiest**. The wall of the clay is made to grow by pinching the side together. The natural centrifugal force makes the clay want to go bowl shaped. If you want to make a mug, or probably more correctly a beaker then you have to keep making the clay go back towards the still centre. As your clay grows higher you may need to cone in. This means making the top part of the pot go back to the center...it is good to try and make a sort of volcano shape like this.

A word about mug making. A mug is only a mug if it has a **handle**. Handles are tricky and require practice. If you manage to make a bowl and a mug and dry them sufficiently well with a battery blow dryer so you can add a handle you made yourself in three hours then you should not be coming to our taster session you should be on the genius show somewhere but some people make it.

If you don't manage to get to the "putting on the handle" stage then we will do it for you...or...we can keep the mug or mugs for another time and you can do them yourselves. My recommendation is...if you get **that keen** on the process **that quickly** then you need to talk to me about how we can get you more time practising on a wheel for less cost.

My advice is just do one taster session and have a chat with me Stephen Hamilton or one of our many drop in teachers.

I notice that there are many videos showing the most consummate professionals knock up the most magnificent mug type shapes in just a few seconds and then they turn to look at you and smirk...well **that's** how its done. I call them the smuggies.

There are a few good beginner video tutorials and I will be making a list and adding to that as we go along. I watch them all the time. As you progress, they become more relevant but at the beginning what you need is simple practice.

My favorite by far is this high school teacher from the US.

I think she is just brilliant and so unpretentious and so damn practical!

At some point in the proceedings you will have made something that vaguely resembles a bowl. Wow! It may not change the trajectory of the universe but it will change **your** perception of how your hands can be connected to the earth. It is just the start.

Of course, you may be someone who comes for the taster session, makes a couple of bowls quite competently and say well that was fun... but it's not really for me and that's fine...who knows ...not everyone is going to become a pottery addict.

Party Pottery tasters.

Some tasters will be hen party/ engagement party/ fun nights with Abba on the music system!

For some folk it may be more fun to book a complete studio session for yourself and your friends. Most basic taster sessions are individuals or sometimes couples but getting your own group together can be pretty kool.

The friend's taster session costs just 400 pounds and you can get ten or twelve or even a couple more at a real squeeze. So that could be as little as 25 pounds per person...

It might be chaos and there is no **guarantee** you will end up with much to fire in the kiln...so I insist everyone makes a pinch pot [see the vid]. Its quite quick can't go wrong and it is quite amusing to laugh at everyone's attempts...as long as you do it nicely.

If anyone comes to these friends tasters and is vaguely useful I or someone will probably spend some time with them and make sure they get some stuff made that can be fired in a kiln. There is a further charge for anything that goes into the kiln which is about 10 pounds per kilo. To give you an idea on that a mug is generally half a kilo so firing and glazing and baking two mugs is about 10 pounds. Much cheaper and more accurate alternatives to this can be found in ASDA where nice white porcelain mugs can be purchased for 60p...and yes you read that right but it's really not the point is it?

Until you have done it there is no point in bleating on about how damn marvellous it feels making something with your hands.

Everyone who does end up with usable plates and bowls will experience a great sense of pride and when you bring this tableware to your table you will be inspired and your friends will be interested and they may well want to have a go themselves and the tableware will become the subject of the conversation.

when you have some friends round and you serve them on hand moulded plates you made...I can assure you it is a good feeling and will be a subject of much conversation....and pride and why not. Pride in the right place is more than OK... Pride in the wrong place...well that's another story which is just too potty to tell right now.

For that reason some of our taster sessions will be Friday night pottery parties where you come along with a bunch of friends fool around make pots... or not... and go off happy... You can even bring and share some wine if you want...naturally we ask for that you are on your most decorous behaviour.

When your three hours is nearly up we will let you know that it is time to clear up and sorry but this is very important ...***you do have to clear up your own*** wheel and make it clean and leave it as you found it.

This applies to everyone and definitely includes those who come as a bunch of friends party.

Now I do understand that ...if you are coming to have a pottery party and then maybe go to Brighton to a night scene of some sort then you may not feel like you want to clean up.

To solve that problem we will have two prices...one is where ***you*** clean up and the other is where ***we*** do all the cleaning.

I reckon this is probably going to be in the region of 100 pounds but let's see. It takes several hours to clean up a pottery room by oneself.

Fortunately, we are splendidly equipped for the cleaning process. We have three huge sinks at different heights! And all the cleaning stuff you need.

When you leave the start with the basics taster you will leave with us the pots you have made and we will then take these pots and glaze them and fire them...a week or two or maybe three later you can collect them.

Whichever taster day you sign up for we will send you some blurb about what to expect.

It goes without saying I hope that punctuality is just considered one of the most basic forms of mutual respect.

If you are late you will make the others wait whilst you organise yourself and we organise you.

I don't mind anyone coming early and talking/helping or making coffee or tea for everyone else.

The cost of the clay and the firing and glazing is included in the cost of ***most*** taster sessions.

Not wishing to repeat myself...read the simple blurb which appears just before you make your booking and please read the emails we send when you have signed up to a course.

Regards Stephen Hamilton