

# **Good As it Gets**

**By Kevin Crowe**

In August of 2001, I completed construction of a 3-chambered 'hikarigama'. The kiln combines anagama and noborigama chambers, providing three aesthetic contexts in one firing. The first chamber is a 13-foot (4m) tube, fired for 3 days to Cone 12, which produces highly flashed and natural ash glazed surfaces. The second chamber is a 100 cu. Ft. (2.83 m<sup>3</sup>) restrained ash environment that enhances minimal brushwork. Shino glazes, and slips are applied to the pots. The third chamber which is identical to the second, is lightly salted, creating flashed gloss surfaces.

The floors and sidewalls of the kiln were constructed with high-and super-duty hard brick, and the arches of all three chambers were made from a homemade castable mixture. Warren Frederick, friend and potter, was the on-site castable consultant. Warren's patience, experience and good humor were invaluable. In two days of mixing and applying the castable, all three chamber arches were completed.

The flues in all chambers consist of a series of 3 throat arches, 15 inches wide by 17 inches high (38X 43 cm), allowing easy movement of ash and heat throughout the kiln. The stack is 22-1/2 x 27 inches (57 x 68.5 cm) by 15 feet (4.6 m) high. Incorporating both active and passive dampers, it creates a strong draft and allows sensitive control.

I fire with dry wood, whatever the local saw millers are cutting. Typically, 5 to 6 cords of mixed oak, pine, cedar and maple are burned in a firing, along with a small pile of edgings.

The kiln is pre-heated for 24 hours or more, with a very low-pressure burner. A small kindling fire is then set outside the ash pit port. This fire is fed until the firebox reaches 1000 deg. F (538 deg. C). The kindling fire is then pushed into the kiln firebox and is stoked until 1500 deg. F ( 816 deg. C) is reached. Stoking is then moved to the main stoking door. Slabs, 30 inches (76 cm.) in length are stoked crisscrossed until cone 10 goes over. The pace of stoking and the dampers, are adjusted to hold temperature between cones 10 and 12 for the next 24 hours, allowing the heat to penetrate to the back of the chamber, and even heat distribution from the arch to the floor.

At this point, thin pieces of wood are side-stoked along the tube, in the 12-inch (30 cm) openings left between settings. Stoking continues at the front of the chamber, while side-stoking the tube. When the middle and back of the tube reach temperature, the front is stoked back up to cone 12 and held for at least another six hours, to melt embers.

After the first firing of the kiln, I found that the second chamber reached cone 9 before the tube was finished, resulting in fairly bland pots. We remedied

this by stoking the second chamber as soon as red heat had developed there, thus stoking the first and second chambers simultaneously. This stoking pattern did the trick, producing nicely flashed and lightly ashed surfaces.

When the tube is finished, ports that run under the main firebox and the ware floor, and surface in the front of the throat arches leading the second chamber, are slightly opened. These channels provide pre-heated primary air to the second chamber, without pulling air through the tube, which may disturb ash and cool pots. The second chamber is side-stoked with edgings until cone 11 has gone throughout the chamber. It is then soaked at high temperature for another 2 to 4 hours. The stoking pattern for the second and third chambers is 4 to 6 pieces of 6-foot (183 cm) edgings, every 3 to 5 minutes. Passive dampers are set to keep the tip of the flame about 6 to 7 feet (approx. 200 cm.) high in the stack.

When the second chamber fires off, cone 7 is bending in the third. The third is stoked quickly and lightly, cleaning the atmosphere before salting. After an hour of oxidizing, 5 pounds (2.27 kg.) of salt are poured onto boards, that are then stoked one at a time between light wood stokes. After the last salt board is in, the chamber is lightly stoked for another hour. The kiln is then sealed. However, the active damper is left open for 3 more hours, allowing gases to escape and embers to burn down.

Before building this kiln, I fired a 200 cu. Ft. ( 5.66 m<sup>3</sup>) noborigama, wood in the first chamber, wood and salt in the second. Firings lasted between 24 to 30 hours. This new kiln, with its anagama, longer firing time and draft innovations, has energized my enthusiasm, curiosity and pots. I am able to pursue my love of anagama pots while continuing to develop my previous work, without having two separate kilns and firings. After 22 years of firing, I'm back at that place of 'not knowing' – of wonder. It's a good neighborhood to be in.

While the transition from my previous kiln to this new one is rooted in aesthetic choices, fuel considerations and design interest, the passage of time and a closer look reveal a more complex motivation at work. Our kilns make more than pots. My sons, Kai and Bram have been at firings since they could stand on their own, to the present, where they can run shifts of stokers. When I began building the hikarigama, Kai was a senior in high school and in a year would be leaving for college. I realized that Bram, 3 years behind Kai, would be going before I knew it, making his own way out of Tye River as well. Building this kiln, taking down the old one- was an essential part of my letting go. Letting go of the past, of Kai, and preparing for letting go of Bram. Hard and necessary work.

Building a kiln I couldn't fire alone, ensured that new people would enter my life with regularity, forcing me to let go of the old habits, routines, expectations – the old teacher. Perhaps I was trying to fill the holes I saw opening in my life. Perhaps parents have been filling holes forever, in a staggering variety of ways. This is how this potter does it.

My wife Linda, has been patiently listening to me muse over kiln plans, draft patterns and stoking cycles for years. She has been unreasonably patient and supportive of my plans to move in to new territory. After a series of "last firings" of the old kiln, Linda would ask: "So when are we going to build this new kiln?" She also saw more than a kiln at work here. It was Linda's support, enthusiasm and interest that moved this kiln out of my head and into the ground. Her pleasure in hosting and working with the kiln crews and unexpected visitors is a gift. She is an intense stoking partner, light on her feet, and directs the traffic of crews getting in and out of bed and off the floor, organizes food, and keeps tea and music flowing, with the grace and charm of the contemporary southern belle that she is. Her irrepressible sense of humor and quirky appreciation for the oddest and most justifiably neglected rock songs, form the context in which firings have become celebrations, and the kiln crew - family.

It is late at night on the third day of a firing. Steve is in the director's chair in front of the firebox, conducting music. Linda and Scott are arm in arm, doing the background vocals and dance steps to Gladys Knight and the Pips version of *Midnight Train to Georgia*. Kai and Bram look up from a game of cards in the woodpile, not yet knowing they are watching stories they will tell their children. I take it in. Letting go – holding on. Good as it gets.

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