

# old models, made new

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Through unlikely partnerships and a do-it-yourself attitude regarding materials, the sourcing of clay and other ceramic materials can be—rather than a chore—a unique opportunity for community growth.

In the 1946 seminal text, *A Potter's Book*, Bernard Leach declared the following: “A potter’s prime need is good clay. Whether he be industrial, peasant, or studio potter the raw material of which pots are made is of fundamental importance.” In today’s ceramic landscape, we thankfully understand the application of clay to be much broader and intersectional than for only the practice of pottery (or for only a practice of men), but the statement shrewdly raises a second question: what makes a clay good, anyway?

Often, we tend to measure clay based on how it performs materially: Does it fire to the right cone temperature? Does it handle my construction method? Is it a nice color? These are all worthy considerations, but I would like to argue that there is far more at stake. Instead of first considering the what of our clays (color, brightness, plasticity, etc.), I think there is much to be gained by considering the who, how, and why of our clays. In other words, how is it that these clays arrived to my studio space? Why is it that someone is digging them out of the ground? And, who benefits from my purchasing of these clays?

I find that food sourcing is a topical and useful comparison with clay sourcing. Chef and food writer, Dan Barber remarked at the end of his book, *The Third Table*, that “Good food cannot be reduced to single ingredients. It requires a web of relationships to support it.” This too, can be applied across any creative field, but especially

those—like ceramics—with a literal and essential connection to land and culture. Barber argues that the sourcing of all raw materials—in their case, ingredients—is a kind of endorsement to a larger system of jobs and environmental care.

If we position our current landscape of clays (and more generally, all of our crafts) in the US in this food-system comparison, we quickly see a small handful of large monoculture mines that have come to dominate our recipes and distributors. This is not necessarily without its own usefulness. It has allowed for a common material language, and rapid growth of tools for organizing this technical understanding (look no further than various research-based social media accounts, and websites like [www.digitalfire.com](http://www.digitalfire.com) and [www.glazy.com](http://www.glazy.com), for instance). Without large mines with large distribution arms, this would likely be impossible. Therefore, there’s little sense in advocating we all stop buying industrial products. However, if we begin to expand the definition of where we get some of our materials from—a combination of commercial and natural resources—we open up new financial opportunities for small manufacturers, and a more diverse finished-goods marketplace for consumers. In a sense, creating the demand for better clay allows for better clay.

As an exercise in this thinking, fellow artist and clay technical advisor for Kentucky Mudworks, Leah Combs, and I partnered





with Kylie Schmidt, coordinator from the non-profit Green Forests Work (GFW), an organization dedicated to the rehabilitation and reforestation of previously strip-mined land throughout Appalachia. GFW routinely finds kaolin-rich seams of clay, in quantities suitable for the contemporary ceramicist, but does not have a direct need for this isolated material itself. We, however, have the means to turn these clays—otherwise incidental to GFW’s process—into studio work that can function both as a revenue stream and excellent public relations for GFW. After a single afternoon of shoveling, we had enough buckets of clay for several months of work, and Schmidt had two energized (and essentially free) fundraisers.

This is, of course, only a single example, and of a relatively small effort. Nonetheless, is it a working model that has dramatically changed the way Combs and I might think about our craft: we don’t so much make pottery as transform and create space. If others were to move in a similar direction—not giving up commercial products, but supplementing these materials with ones with a larger positive community impact—we could pool our resources and create caches of information or contacts. We could create a culture that invites our practice or participation whenever earth is involved! Imagine, when someone needs to dig a foundation, that they first contact nearby ceramicists to come extract materials that could be useful. Or, if an urban contractor wanted to build a more robust public image, perhaps they work with these same

groups of ceramicists to transform materials from a construction site into work that then lives inside of the finished, built space. These efforts become mutually beneficial, and earnestly rooted in a shared narrative of place. No freight shipping required.

This article’s focus isn’t about the real carbon footprint of a bag of mixed clay (although I recommend we all do these calculations soon). Neither does it discuss the hand-processing of natural clays for use in the studio (there are other articles that have done this wonderfully). Instead, this article aims to highlight how simple it can be to begin building the networks of good clay, where the narrative of the relationship to earth extends far beyond our studio practice. That informed and ethical clay sourcing is not merely a prerogative of the ceramicist, but rather, a responsibility.

Digging by hand, we can reclaim a once-ubiquitous knowledge of regional geology, and provide an earnest foundation for aesthetics: maintaining a respect for tradition, while relentlessly making space for new networks of craft, design, and activism.

*To learn more about Green Forests Work or for information about donating or participating in their reforestation events, visit [www.greenforestswork.org](http://www.greenforestswork.org).*

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1 Kylie Schmidt and Leah Combs collecting clay materials from previously strip-mined land as it is being rehabilitated for new trees by Green Forests Work. 2 Naturally occurring stoneware as it is being dug out of the ground, highly plastic, and which fires between cone 6–10. 3 Combs examining and collecting clay materials from previously strip-mined land. 4 Combs throwing the single-source clay after minimal processing. 5 Luke Gnadinger’s set of cups, to 3½ in. (9 cm) in height, naturally sourced stoneware from Green Forests Work.