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Unzicker Brothers Pottery  
Thorntown fixture is a family affair

By Lisa Munniksma

Looking at Tom and Jeff Unzicker's pottery, anyone can recognize the heritage and rich traditions that are baked into the clay. When meeting the brothers who operate Unzicker Brothers Pottery, however, many would be surprised at the youth of these dedicated artists honing their craft.

Both men found their skill in pottery while in college at Goshen College. Jeff initially had no interest in his older brother's craft and paid little attention to pottery as an art form. During and after college, Tom spent time on pottery projects in Tanzania and Botswana. Jeff's curiosity was soon piqued when he went to college and he became an art major. The brothers even studied under the same professor and professional potter, although years apart.

Tom finished his Masters of Fine Arts in 2000, and since then, the brothers have worked together on Tom's five-acre property just off the beaten path near Thorntown. They make pottery in their studio, fire it in the wood-fired kiln out back, and display and offer their work for sale in their gallery and at art shows.

Tom and Jeff create 3,000 to 4,000 pots, bowls, vases, and decorative pieces each year. On their pottery wheels, they consume three to four tons of premixed clay from Indiana Clay Company in Battle Ground.

Wandering behind the renovated garage that is now Unzicker Brothers' studio and gallery, an unknowledgeable person would wonder what exactly takes place on their property. The 30-foot long wood-fired kiln of brick and earth appears intimidating. There is room inside this cave to fit 500 to 1,000 pieces of pottery.

"It's based on early Asian-style kilns," with some of their own adjustments, explains Tom.

The brothers burn 20 to 30 wagons full of wood throughout the year. The kiln is fired up for four days at a time. The fire requires stoking every 10 to 15 minutes, so Tom and Jeff take shifts. The interior temperature climbs higher than 2,000 degrees, and flames from the chimney ascend 15 to 20 feet into the air.

They choose to use a wood-fired kiln because of the unique look it creates. Inside, the wood ash actually turns to glass and coats the pots. With the fire at the entrance to the kiln and the chimney at the rear, the heat, flames and ash are pulled through the chamber. Not one piece of pottery goes untouched.

“That can be very hard on the clay surfaces,” Jeff says, pointing out that even using painstaking care, they have a 10 to 15 percent loss of pottery in the kiln.

What pieces remain foster a look of elegance and organics combined. Tom says some artists dismiss the value of wood-fired pottery and believe there’s no way to control the end result. But the earthy tones, hazy designs and inlays from the seashells they rested on in the kiln create a look that’s no accident. Some pots are more uniform in color and design than others. Deep reds and oranges and smoky browns and blues form lines and shapes, largely at the whim of the ash and heat inside the blazing oven.

“Clays are a really important part of the finished product. You can change clays to get different results out of firing,” Jeff says.

Coating the pieces with thin films of clay will produce a range of effects, including colors and textures. “It’s a long learning curve,” Tom admits.

The brothers’ process is always evolving. Refinement and fine-tuning are constant goals, and their pieces change over time.

“One of the nice things about having a partner is this kind of work can be kind of isolating” when you’re working in a studio for days at a time, Tom says. The pair exchange ideas and try out new techniques.

Each potter’s artwork differs slightly, although, Tom says, “We’ve developed a little bit of a studio aesthetic.”

Their work ranges from small bowls and coffee mugs to medium-sized kettles and plates to large decorative pots and vases. Retail prices range from \$12 to \$1,500, with most pieces less than \$200.

The Unzickers started working earnestly with the largest pieces in their collection three years ago when they built the wood-fired kiln. The massive clay works of art can weigh more than 100 pounds.

“We’ve been pleasantly surprised (by the public’s interest). Mostly they’re for private homeowners. Houses are getting bigger and you’ve got a lot of space to fill,” Tom says.

In addition to the distinctive appearance the wood firing lends to the pottery, clients appreciate it for its usefulness, too.

“It’s all stoneware. There’s nothing toxic or harmful in wood ash glaze. That’s one of the benefits of high-temperature wood firing,” Jeff says.

The public is welcome to visit the studio Monday through Saturday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., although the Unzickers suggest calling ahead to be sure someone is there. The brothers

also host an open house twice a year. They travel to 20 or more art shows each year where they meet art lovers and gain dedicated fans of their work.

Their story and work is online at [www.unzickerpottery.com](http://www.unzickerpottery.com)

#### SIDEBAR: Round the Fountain Art Fair

Unzicker Brothers Pottery will be one of approximately 100 artists of all genres on display at the 35th annual Round the Fountain Art Fair in downtown Lafayette on May 24.

“The Round the Fountain Art Fair is a juried fine art fair, which certainly attracts both casual and serious art lovers from near and far. But the fair is a community event, too,” says Grant Flora with the Round the Fountain Art Fair.

“Some people just come to watch people and be a part of the festivities, I’m sure. The fair draws folks downtown to shop, eat, stroll around. So it’s a little bit of everything,” he continues.

The event runs 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and admission is free. Funds raised from the exhibiting artists are distributed to area high school art departments.