

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Understanding where pottery started
- » Knowing what you actually need to begin
- » Comparing hand building and wheel throwing
- » Discovering painting and firing
- » Clearing your mind by making pottery

Chapter 1

What Is Pottery, Really?

You're holding this book because something pulled you toward clay.

Maybe you watched a video of someone throwing on a wheel and felt an inexplicable calm wash over you. Maybe a friend went to a pottery class and came home glowing in a way that had nothing to do with the mug they made and everything to do with the two hours they spent making it. Maybe you're simply tired of hobbies that happen on a screen, and you want to make something you can actually hold. Maybe you don't even know why, exactly. You just know you want to try.

That instinct is ancient. It is tens of thousands of years old. And it is correct.

Pottery is one of the oldest crafts in human history, and it's currently experiencing a revival that has surprised almost everyone in the ceramics world, including the people teaching it. Studio memberships are wait-listed. Classes book out weeks in advance. Social media feeds are full of people covered in clay looking more genuinely content than they do in any other context. Something is happening, and it isn't a trend in the fleeting sense of the word. People are coming to clay and staying, because clay offers something that almost nothing else in modern life does: a process that demands your complete, undivided, phone-down, brain-quiet presence, and rewards it with a physical object you made with your own hands from a lump of earth.

This book is your guide to that process. Not just the technical parts, although we cover those in full detail across the chapters that follow. But also, the why of it. The history, the methods, the materials, the fires, the failures, and the specific, irreplaceable feeling of opening a kiln and finding something beautiful in there that you made.

We start from the beginning in this chapter. What pottery actually is. Where it came from. What you need to get started. What the main methods involve. And why dirty hands consistently produce clearer minds. If you have already jumped ahead to a later chapter because you couldn't wait — we understand completely, and we respect the enthusiasm — come back here eventually. The foundations matter and this is where they live.

Where the Heck Did Pottery Start, and Where Is It Going?

Pottery is, without exaggeration, one of humanity's oldest surviving technologies. The earliest known ceramic objects are figurines discovered in what is now the Czech Republic, dated to approximately 29,000 years ago. Functional pottery vessels — the bowls, jars, and storage containers that changed how humans lived — begin to appear in the archaeological record around 20,000 years ago in East Asia, and spread across cultures and continents over the following millennia with a consistency that tells you something important: Every human civilization that has ever existed has figured out, independently, that clay plus fire equals something useful.

Think about what that means for a moment. Before writing. Before metal tools. Before agriculture. Before most of the technologies we associate with the word “civilization,” humans were making pottery. They were wedging clay, shaping it by hand, firing it in open bonfires, and producing vessels that could store grain, carry water, cook food, and hold the remains of the dead. Pottery wasn't a decorative art form. It was infrastructure. It was survival technology built from the ground beneath their feet.

The wheel arrived much later — around 3,500 BCE in Mesopotamia, in what is now Iraq and Syria — and transformed pottery from a slow, hand-built process into something that could be produced with speed, consistency, and extraordinary precision. The potter's wheel is one of the most significant mechanical inventions in human history, and in its basic principle it hasn't changed in five and a half thousand years. The wheel you sit down at in your first class, or in the studio you eventually join, operates on exactly the same concept as the one that produced

clay vessels for ancient Mesopotamian markets. They are also as ugly as ever. It has always made us laugh that this equipment that helps produce so much creativity actually looks exactly like a urinal.

What changed, over the centuries, was the technology around the clay: better kilns, more reliable fuel sources, the development of glaze chemistry, the industrialization of ceramic production, and eventually the mass manufacturing that filled the world's homes with consistent, inexpensive, machine-made pottery that was thoroughly functional and completely impersonal.

And here is where the current moment becomes interesting. Because the same industrial revolution that produced cheap, abundant mass-market ceramics also, slowly and inevitably, made people hungry for the opposite. For pieces made by hand. For objects with variation and imperfection and a traceable human story. For the specific satisfaction of owning something that exists exactly once, made by one person who made a series of deliberate choices about its form, its surface, and its purpose.

The contemporary ceramics revival isn't nostalgia for a pre-industrial past. It is something more forward-looking than that: a conscious recalibration of what we value in objects, and a recognition that the making of objects by hand provides something for the maker that no amount of consuming other people's making can replicate.

Which is why you're holding this book. And why the studio down the road has a waiting list. And why, after 29,000 years, people are still sitting down in front of lumps of clay and deciding, with their hands and their time and their attention, to make something.



TIP

If you want to understand how far pottery has come and how consistent its fundamentals have remained, spend ten minutes in the ceramics section of any large museum. Look at what different cultures made, at what scale, with what level of sophistication, and with what apparent care for beauty as well as function. Pottery is a story about humanity told in clay. You're about to add a small chapter to it.

The craft is currently sitting at the intersection of three cultural forces:

- » A renewed appreciation for handmade objects and slow processes
- » A growing awareness of mindfulness and the need for activities that produce genuine presence
- » A broader creative independence movement in which people are choosing to make pieces rather than simply buy them

Add to that the rise of home studios, the accessibility of online learning, the global community of ceramicists sharing work and process across social platforms, and the increasing availability of community studio spaces that put professional equipment within reach of people who are not yet ready to invest in their own, and the picture becomes clear. Pottery isn't having a moment. It is having a renaissance. And the front door is open.

The Tools, Materials, and Space You Need to Make Pottery

Before we go any further, let's address the question that stops more people from starting than any other: What do I actually need?

The short answer is: considerably less than you think.

Pottery has a reputation, not entirely deserved, for requiring significant investment in equipment and materials before you can begin. Wheels, kilns, bags of clay, shelves of tools, a dedicated studio space — the mental image of a fully equipped ceramics setup can feel financially and logistically out of reach for someone who just wants to find out whether they enjoy making things with clay. That gap between the imagined barrier and the actual starting point is where a lot of potential potters stall indefinitely.

The truth is that the entry point to pottery is genuinely low. Here is what you actually need to begin.

Clay

Clay is the material. Everything else is in service of it. For a beginner, a commercially prepared, ready-to-use stoneware clay body is the right starting point: It's forgiving, durable, food-safe when fired correctly, and available from ceramic suppliers in quantities that make sense for home use. A two- to three-kilogram bag is enough to spend several sessions experimenting without committing to a large purchase. You don't need multiple clay bodies. You don't need to source exotic materials. You need one good clay and your hands.

We see so many beginners lose heart because they tried to trim a piece of clay that was too wet or glaze a piece that was too cold. Pottery is less about what you do, and more about when you do it. One day clay is flexible and cooperative; the next,

it's stubborn and brittle. In the following sections, we walk you through the five universal stages of clay (see Figure 1-1) so that you can stop guessing and start working in harmony with the kiln gods. (Flip to Chapter 2 for additional details on clay.)

FIGURE 1-1:
The life cycle of
clay, with
moisture
gradually leaving
the clay.



Source: Crockd

Stage 1: Greenware

Think of *greenware* as clay in its most raw, flexible, and forgiving state. It's cool to the touch because it's still holding onto water and moisture that acts like a lubricant to keep the material soft and pliable. This stage is the only time in the pottery process where “do-overs” are completely free. It looks, feels, and even smells kind of like play dough.



TIP

If it feels like you can continue molding and shaping your vessel with your fingers, then the clay is still in its greenware stage.

Stage 2: Leather-hard

Leather-hard clay is the essential middle ground of the greenware process where the material has lost enough water to feel stiff and cold — resembling a block of cheddar cheese or heavy leather. At this stage, the clay is no longer floppy but hasn't yet reached a brittle state, making it the most important phase for refinement and detail. It's the ideal time for *trimming*, which involves flipping a pot over to carve a perfect foot ring, and for joining decorative handles by using the “score and slip” technique.



TIP

Because clay ribbons off beautifully during this “Goldilocks” phase without sticking to tools, it is widely considered the best time for intricate carving and decorative work.

Stage 3: Bone-dry

Often referred to as the “danger zone,” bone-dry ware is the final stage of greenware where the clay has lost all its physical water, resulting in a lighter color and a surface that no longer feels cool to the touch.



WARNING

While this stage signifies that the piece is officially kiln-ready, it is also the most dangerous moment in a pot's life because the material has become incredibly brittle. At this point, even a firm grip can cause a rim to snap or a handle to pop off, and you must strictly avoid adding wet clay to the piece, as the moisture imbalance can lead to a “structural divorce.” Although it is finally prepared for its first firing, you must handle bone-dry clay as if it were made of delicate eggshells to ensure it survives long enough to reach the kiln.

Stage 4: Bisqueware

Bisqueware is clay that has successfully survived its initial trip through the kiln's fire. During this process, the heat chemically changes the clay by driving out chemically bonded water, transforming it from fragile earth into a permanent, porous, rocklike material. This “exorcism” is a literal one-way street: After a piece has been bisqued, it can never be recycled back into soft mud again. However, the clay is purposefully left in a porous state so that it can “drink” up liquid glaze. When you dip a bisque piece into a bucket of glaze, you'll often hear a satisfying hiss as the clay sucks the moisture in, leaving behind a dusty coating of glaze on the surface.



TIP

Note that it's controversial, but you absolutely can skip this first firing. Find out more on this later (see Chapters 15 and 16).

Stage 5: Glaze-fired

The *glaze-fired* stage is the official finish line of the pottery process. During this phase, the piece returns to the kiln at a much higher temperature, causing the applied glaze to melt into a smooth, waterproof coating of glass. This final transformation completes the journey from mud to masterpiece, leaving you with a functional, typically food-safe vessel that is finally ready for your morning coffee. This stage is widely celebrated because it is when all the “mysterious clay secrets” are finally revealed; the colors pop, the texture is permanently set, and what was once just a bit of earth is now functional and food-safe. Voila!

Basic tools

The full tool kit of an experienced potter is extensive, and we cover it in detail in the chapters that follow. But the working minimum for a beginner is:

- » **A wire tool:** For cutting clay off the wheel or slicing slabs
- » **A wooden rib or kidney:** For smoothing and shaping walls

- » **A needle tool:** For checking wall thickness, trimming, and detail work
- » **A sponge:** For managing moisture at the wheel and smoothing surfaces
- » **A loop or ribbon tool:** For trimming feet
- » **A small bucket of water:** Always within reach — always

That is the honest minimum. Everything else is useful but optional at the beginning. Many of the supplementary tools in a ceramic supplier's catalogue are items that experienced potters have added to their kit over years, solving specific problems that arise from making specific pieces. Check out Chapter 2 for more details, and what home objects you can use instead.

Space

You need a surface for making pottery, ideally one you don't mind getting dirty. A sturdy table with a wipeable surface is entirely sufficient for hand building. A dedicated corner of a garage, a spare room, or even a well-protected kitchen bench can serve as a functional home studio for the early stages of your practice.

The key requirements are a stable surface at a comfortable working height, access to water for tool rinsing and hand washing, and a floor or surface beneath your working area that can be wet mopped rather than swept. Clay dust, as we discuss in detail in Chapters 3 and 4, is something to manage proactively, and the setup of your space is the first and most effective line of that management.

THE KILN QUESTION

You don't need a kiln. Not yet. Most likely not ever, depending on the kind of practice you develop.

Kilns are the most expensive and most space-requiring piece of equipment in pottery, and for a beginner they represent a substantial investment in a direction of making that you haven't yet confirmed you want to pursue in the long term. The shared studio model exists specifically to remove this barrier: Your pieces get fired in the studio kiln as part of your membership, and you get professional firing results without needing to own or operate the equipment yourself.

When and if you reach a stage in your practice where the investment makes sense — when you're making enough volume, with enough consistency, to justify the cost and the dedicated space — the kiln question will answer itself. Until then, use the studio's.

If you're starting at a shared studio — which for most beginners is genuinely the best option — the space question is entirely answered for you. A good ceramics studio provides the bench, the wheel, the tools, the clay, the kiln, the expertise, and the community. The cost of studio membership is, for the majority of people beginning this journey, significantly more economical than attempting to replicate all of that at home before you know what you're doing and what you actually enjoy making.

Mud Methods: Hand Building versus Wheel Throwing

You have two main ways to make pottery, and they are different enough in experience, technique, and personality that most potters develop a clear preference for one over the other, even as they use both throughout their practice. They are hand building and wheel throwing, and before we dive into the detailed chapters on each, here is the honest, plain-language introduction to both. (Part 2 covers hand building; Part 3 is all about wheel throwing.)

Hand building

Hand building is exactly what it sounds like: shaping clay using your hands, simple tools, and a small number of fundamental techniques, without a wheel. It's the oldest form of pottery and, for many people, the most immediately accessible.

The three core methods of hand building are pinching, coiling, and slab building:

- » *Pinching* involves pressing your thumbs into a ball of clay and gradually opening and thinning the walls with your fingers — it's the most basic form, and it teaches you more about clay behavior in 20 minutes than most other introductions.
- » *Coiling* involves rolling clay into long ropes and stacking them to build up walls, which can produce forms of considerable height and complexity.
- » *Slab building* involves rolling or cutting flat sheets of clay and assembling them like the walls and base of a structure, which lends itself particularly well to angular, geometric, or architectural forms.

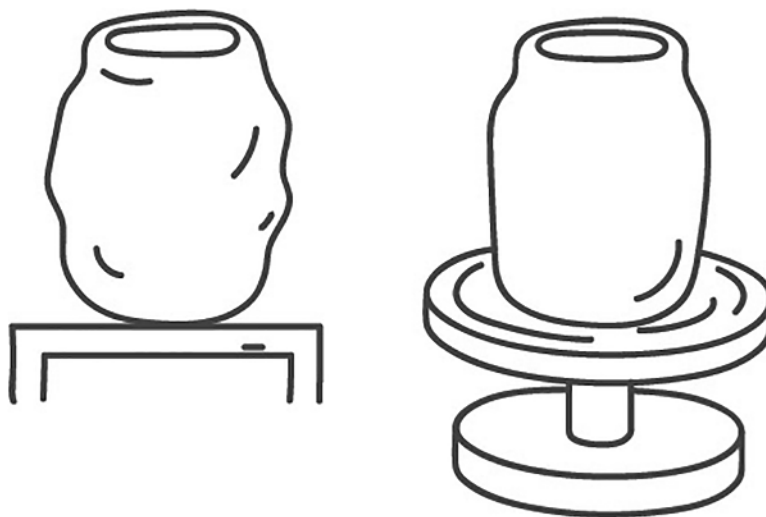


REMEMBER

Hand building rewards patience, spatial thinking, and a willingness to work slowly. It doesn't require expensive equipment. It can be done at a kitchen table. The forms it produces can range from rough and organic to precise and architectural, and the technique is particularly well suited to sculptural work, tiles, and anything with corners or flat planes that a wheel wouldn't naturally produce.

Many beginners find hand building more immediately manageable than wheel throwing, because the clay isn't moving under your hands and you have time to think about what you're doing. The challenge with hand building is consistency: Getting even wall thickness, reliable joins, and forms that stay true through the drying process requires discipline and attention that develops over time. Figure 1-2 compares a hand-built piece and a wheel-thrown piece.

FIGURE 1-2:
A hand-built coil
vessel and a
wheel-thrown
cylinder at the
same stage
of making.



Source: Crockd

Wheel throwing

Wheel throwing is the method most people picture when they think of pottery, and the Patrick Swayze association has been made so many times in ceramics studios around the world that experienced potters are now essentially immune to it. We mention this not to discourage you from thinking it, but to prepare you for the reaction you'll get if you say it out loud on your first day. One acknowledgment. Move on. The wheel is waiting.

The pottery wheel is a motorized spinning disc on which a ball of clay is centered and then opened, pulled, and shaped into a form while it rotates. The centrifugal force of the spinning clay and the pressure applied by the potter's hands work

together to create smooth, symmetrical forms — cylinders, bowls, bottles, plates — with a speed and consistency that hand building cannot match after the skill is developed.

The significant caveat is that development. Wheel throwing has a learning curve that is real, sometimes steep, and occasionally dispiriting for people who expected to sit down and produce beautiful mugs in their first session. The *centering stage* alone — the preliminary process of getting the clay running true on the wheel before you can begin forming — takes most beginners several sessions to do reliably and confidently. The pulling stage, which produces the walls, takes longer still. The complete process of throwing a consistent, intentional cylinder typically requires somewhere between 5 and 20 hours of practice to begin feeling natural, depending on the individual.



We tell you this not to discourage you but to set an honest expectation. The potters whose work you admire on social media — the people with the beautiful, even-walled mugs and the effortless-looking pulls — have sat at that wheel for hundreds of hours. The wheel rewards the investment. It is one of the most satisfying physical skills you can develop. But it asks for patience and practice in return, and the people who get there fastest are almost always the ones who decided, early on, to enjoy the process of getting there rather than fixating on the destination.

Painting and Firing Your Pieces

Making the form is one half of pottery. What happens to it afterwards — how it is decorated, glazed, and fired — is the other half, and it is a half that beginners often underestimate in both complexity and satisfaction.

Here is the basic journey your piece takes from the moment you finish making it to the moment it becomes a finished ceramic object. See Parts 4 and 5 for full details.

Drying

Freshly made clay is full of moisture, and before it can go anywhere near a kiln, it needs to dry completely to what potters call bone-dry — the stage at which all the physical water has evaporated from the clay and the piece feels room temperature or slightly warm to the touch, with no cool or damp spots anywhere. (We discuss clay's stages earlier in this chapter.) Depending on the thickness and size of your piece, this process takes days to weeks. Rushing it is one of the most reliable ways to ruin a piece before it even reaches the kiln, for reasons we cover in detail in Chapter 15.

Bisque firing

The first kiln firing — the bisque — transforms your bone-dry greenware into a permanent, rock-hard ceramic material. At bisque temperatures, the physical and chemical water is driven out of the clay permanently, the organic material burns away, and the clay body undergoes an irreversible molecular change. What goes into the bisque firing as fragile, dusty greenware comes out as bisqueware: hard, stable, porous, and ready to accept glaze. You cannot reverse it. You cannot re-wet it and start again. The bisque fire is the moment your piece crosses from temporary to permanent.

Decorating and glazing

Bisqueware is your canvas. This phase is where design, color, and surface quality are applied, through underglazes, glazes, and a growing range of surface decoration techniques that we explore in full in Part 4.

Underglaze is the color layer — the paint of pottery. It goes on before the protective glaze coat and enables you to create patterns, illustrations, lettering, and layered color work with the kind of precision that requires patience and a fine brush but produces results that are permanently sealed into the surface of the finished piece.

Glaze is the glass layer — the protective, waterproofing, food-safe finish that transforms bisqueware from a functional but porous object into a sealed, durable, beautiful ceramic. Glaze starts as a liquid mineral suspension, goes on as a dull powder coating, and melts in the kiln into the smooth, glassy surface of a finished pot. The range of glaze effects available — from matte to glossy, from transparent to richly opaque, from simple solid color to complex reactive chemistry — is one of the most genuinely compelling areas of the craft and one that experienced potters explore for their entire careers without exhausting the possibilities.

Glaze firing

The second and final kiln firing is where everything comes together. At glaze temperatures — significantly higher than bisque — the glaze materials melt, flow, and fuse into glass. The clay body vitrifies. The colors develop their final intensity. And the piece that has been in progress for days or weeks finally reveals itself as a finished object.

The glaze firing is also the most unpredictable part of the process, in the best possible way. Glazes that looked flat and dull on the bisque surface come alive. Colors that appeared similar in the bucket separate dramatically in the kiln. Two pieces glazed identically can come out looking subtly different because of where they sat

in the firing, how the heat circulated, and a hundred small variables that even experienced potters cannot fully predict. This unpredictability isn't a flaw. It is one of pottery's most compelling features — the collaboration between the maker and the fire that produces results no other medium can replicate.



TIP

The gap between what a glaze looks like in the bucket and what it looks like after firing is one of the biggest surprises beginners encounter. A test tile for every new glaze — a small, fired sample of that specific glaze on your specific clay body — is the most reliable way to understand what you're going to get before you commit it to a finished piece. Make them a habit from the start.

Clay and Creative Mindfulness: How Dirty Hands Make a Clear Mind

We want to end this chapter with something that is not in the technical curriculum but is, for many people who come to pottery, the actual reason they stay.

Pottery is extraordinarily good for your mental state.

This statement isn't a wellness marketing claim. It is a description of what happens neurologically and psychologically when you sit down with clay. The material demands your full sensory attention in a way that is rare in modern life. You're feeling the clay's temperature and moisture and resistance under your hands. You're watching the form change. You're making constant small corrections based on feedback that arrives through your fingertips rather than a screen. No multitasking is available. No background half-attention is possible. The clay knows when you stop paying attention, and it responds accordingly — usually by collapsing, warping, or developing a crack in exactly the place you stopped noticing.

What this produces, for most people who try pottery, is a state that is almost identical to the meditative state that mindfulness practices work hard to cultivate deliberately: an anchored, present, sensory-focused engagement with what you're doing right now, with no bandwidth left over for the mental noise of everything else. The thoughts that follow you around all day — the to-do lists, the replayed conversations, the low-grade anxiety about things you cannot currently affect — simply don't fit in the mental space that clay occupies. They must wait outside.

For two hours at a time, your hands are covered in clay and your mind is right here. We've been running pottery studios for over six years now, and people never leave in the same mental state they arrived in.

The research on craft and mental health reflects this consistently. Studies on making, flow states, and manual creativity show reductions in cortisol levels, improvements in mood and self-reported well-being, and the kind of deep engagement that psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls “flow” — the state of being completely absorbed in a challenging, rewarding activity at the edge of your skill level. Pottery, particularly in the early stages when every session involves learning something new, produces this state reliably and often. We love pottery, because it helps you find your chill without having to sit still.

Also, you have something specifically valuable about making a physical object. In a world that increasingly produces and consumes things that are digital, ephemeral, and intangible, the act of creating something you can hold, use, and give to someone else carries a satisfaction that goes beyond what the object itself is worth. The mug you made is not just a mug. It is evidence that you can take raw materials and transform them into something functional and beautiful. That evidence sits in your hand, and on your shelf, and in the hands of whoever you give it to, for years.



REMEMBER

You don’t have to be creative to do pottery. You don’t have to have made anything with your hands before. You don’t have to have an artistic background, a natural talent, or a clear vision of what you want to make. You need a willingness to begin, a tolerance for the learning curve, and the ability to find the process interesting even when the results are not yet what you hoped for. The creativity comes. The skill comes. The connection to the material comes. All of them come from doing it, not from being ready to do it. We’re big believers that it’s not about the art, it’s about getting arty.

This book covers the full span of the craft from the fundamentals through to glazing, firing, design, studio etiquette, and the care of finished work. The chapters that follow give you the technical foundation to make real, functional, beautiful pottery with genuine confidence. But the most important detail we can tell you here is this: The point is not the mug.

The mug is wonderful. The mug is the goal. But the point — the thing that potters across 30,000 years of human history have understood intuitively and that contemporary neuroscience is now confirming in detail — is the making. The process. The two hours with clay on your hands and nothing else on your mind. The specific, embodied, irreplaceable experience of turning earth into something.

The mug is just the excuse to have that experience.

Welcome to pottery. Let’s get started.

