

# ART FROM THE INFERNO



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HAS POTTERS ALL FIRED UP**

*Story by WESLEY PULKKA ■ For the Journal  
Photographs by JOHN PROKOS ■ Special to the Journal*

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Story by **WESLEY PULKKA** ■ *For the Journal*  
Photographs by **JOHN PROKOS** ■ *Special to the Journal*

**E**arth, air, fire, water and elbow grease come together in the University of New Mexico's Anagama Japanese-style, wood-burning kiln near Madrid.

The University Kiln — typical of kilns built during the 16th century in Japan and with roots reaching back to ancient China — is one of two wood-fueled kilns in New Mexico and is only one of 100 currently in use in the country. The vast majority of contemporary ceramic firings these days are in electric- or gas-fired kilns.

The results of the kiln's fourth firing since construction last spring and summer will be displayed at the Running Ridge Gallery on Saturday.

Michael Prokos organized the show and is one of eight potters who will exhibit their best examples, selected from more than 350 pieces fired during a 72-hour burn last month.

University of New Mexico associate ceramics professor Bill Gilbert said the three-day burn

consumed five cords of wood and resulted in a 75-percent success rate for serviceable ware. He estimated half the pots were exhibition quality. The ceramicists are using scrap wood.

"I'm really pleased and excited by how fast we are learning to fire this kiln. This group of potters are hard-working and talented people who are developing this project into a functional learning and community building tool," Gilbert said.

The kiln is the brainchild of UNM ceramics graduate Scott Rutherford, graduate student Ben Hall and Gilbert.

Rutherford and Hall were introduced to wood firing while in undergraduate school at Western Michigan University. Rutherford was further inspired by a workshop in Flagstaff where two similar kilns are in use.

Rutherford said he was impressed by the beautiful colors and surface textures that are unique to wood firing. He

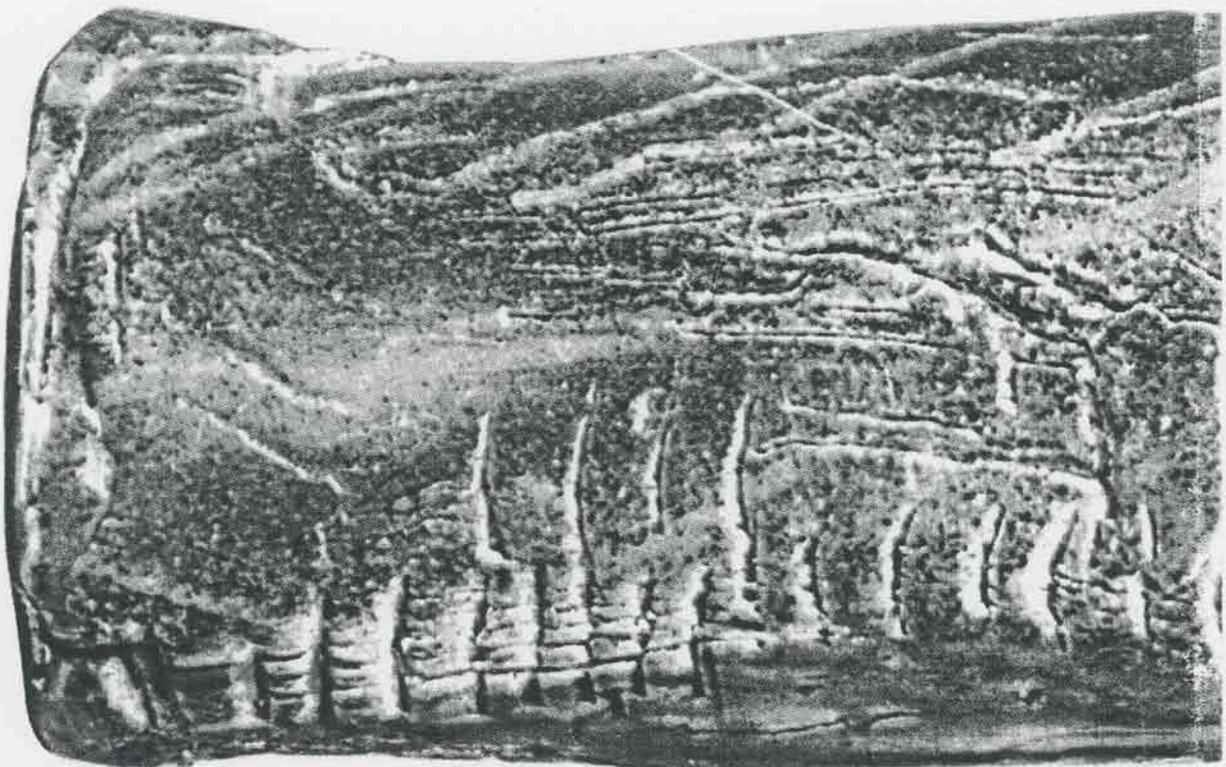
### If you go

**WHAT:** Wood-fired ceramics exhibition by Ben Hall, Joe Kroen, Michael Prokos, Greg Ondo, Brie Rickson, Scott Rutherford and Almut Stamer

**WHEN:** 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Saturday

**WHERE:** Runr Ridge Gallery, 6 Canyon Road, Santa Fe

**HOW MUCH:** Free. For information call 988-2515



**UNIQUE TEXTURE:** This is one of Michael Prokos' ceramic pieces fired in a Japanese-style, wood-fired kiln built near Madrid.

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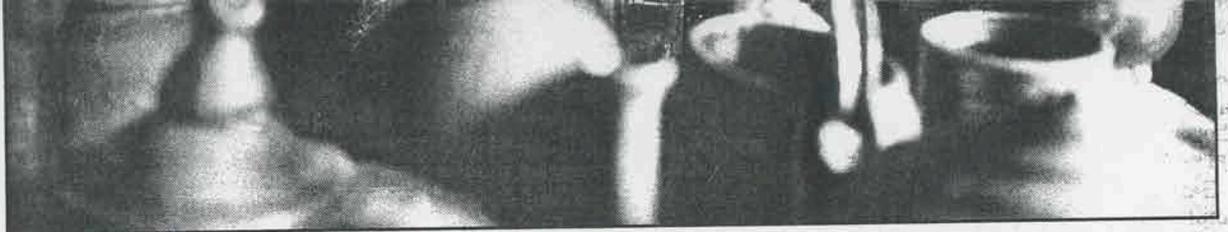
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JOHN PROKOS/SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

**FINISHED PROCESS:** After cooling down for a week after being fired, pots are ready to be unloaded from the kiln.

# UNM wood-burning kiln has potters all fired up

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read everything he could and  
talked to experienced potters to  
finalize his concept.

"Our kiln is specifically designed  
to allow the flame and ash to flow  
around the ware like water would  
pass over stones in a stream bed,"  
Rutherford said.

He explained that Hall used the  
shape of a candle flame as a model  
for the kiln's main chamber. The  
teardrop form allows fire, air and  
ash to flow freely through the  
hillside kiln.

The final design was built on land  
owned by the Children's Workshop,  
a private nonprofit elementary  
school no longer holding classes for  
young children. The kiln will hold  
up to 700 pieces of pottery.

Gilbert received \$5,000 from the  
UNM provost to build the kiln and  
its protective shed.

"We estimated that if we bought  
all of the prefinished fire brick at  
retail prices the project would cost  
\$25,000. When we only had \$5,000  
to work with we decided to make  
the bricks and do all of the  
construction ourselves," Gilbert  
said.

With 15 ceramics students and 15  
other volunteers under Gilbert's  
supervision, 10 tons of brick clay  
and several tons of sand were  
fashioned into thousands of adobe-  
style, sun-dried bricks.

The bricks were allowed to air  
dry on the ground, then were  
cemented into place in the kiln  
structure. The bricks were laid  
unfired and plastered over a  
special refractory cement. The  
process took five months before it

was ready for the first firing.

"We fired the kiln to fire the  
bricks and dry everything out. That  
was the big gamble because we  
didn't know if the structure would  
crack or collapse but we went  
ahead and filled it with pottery and  
lit the fires," Gilbert said.

He explained that the kiln was  
heated very slowly to evaporate the  
water in the clay and cement to  
prevent splitting or cracking.  
Gilbert was pleased that the first  
firing achieved a temperature of  
2,400 degrees F without any  
significant cracking or structural  
collapse.

"It gets stronger with each firing,  
and we've built a shed roof over it  
to protect it from the elements,"  
Gilbert said. "With reasonable care  
it should last at least another 20  
years."

Rutherford said the history of  
high-temperature, wood-fired  
pottery reaches back to Chinese  
bank (clay tunnel) kilns built as  
early as 2000 B.C. and evolved into  
Japanese Anagama (single-  
chamber brick kilns) during the  
Momoyama period. He said the  
organic surfaces and subtle Earth  
colors made wood-fired pottery  
very desirable for the Zen  
Buddhist-inspired tea ceremonies  
in vogue during the 16th century.

"The freedom of form went quite  
well with Buddhist philosophy in  
Japan, but we aren't trying to  
create a tea ceremony here. We're  
just inspired by the way the  
pottery looked. It's a very free-  
flowing aesthetic that inspires  
everyone that fires in this kiln,"  
Rutherford said.

Almut Stamer, who participated

in the fourth firing, admits to some  
Oriental influence in her work.  
Stamer ran a food concession at the  
Naropa Institute (a Buddhist  
studies college) in Boulder before  
making her home in Placitas. "My  
garden lanterns do have an  
Oriental look. I guess hanging  
around all of those Buddhists  
rubbed off on me," Stamer said  
with a gentle laugh.

UNM graduate Joe Kroenung and  
Rutherford plan to extend future  
firing schedules to at least six  
days.

"It makes a real difference in the  
quality of the results when you  
give the kiln time to gently heat  
soak everything inside. The best  
ware coming out of wood fired  
kilns are the product of sustained  
burns," Kroenung said.

Gilbert's original proposal was  
designed to draw together the  
ceramic programs at the  
Albuquerque, Valencia, Gallup and  
Taos UNM campuses and to allow  
the university to reach out to local  
potters. So far students from the  
Valencia campus have participated  
in two firings and many potters  
from the area have taken an  
interest.

"The Anagama kiln is a great  
community builder. It gets people  
together to learn how to do  
something. It teaches people how to  
work together with a 24-hour-a-day  
burn schedule. If one crew screws  
up the next crew has to make up  
for it. It's a fabulous experience,"  
Gilbert said.

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