

# The Pleasures Of Pottery

*Paha couple enjoy creating art pieces in their home studio*

*By Yvonne Prater*

If you have ever driven past Paha, you might think the only things to see are a grain elevator, a couple of houses and a few trees. It is hard to notice any type of business taking shape there.

But since April 2005, John and Jean Richards have set up shop—so to speak—in Paha to do what they enjoy: making pottery. The pottery they make is called Raku firing, which is an old Japanese process different from many pottery styles.

Jean was born and raised in Wisconsin, a small-town girl who moved to Seattle in 1967. In 1984, she moved to Ritzville.

“For some reason, I thought it would be fun to own a tavern,” says Jean. “I found out soon enough that it was a lot more fun sitting on the other side of the bar than it was working behind it. I also owned a business that catered to the younger kids in town that had pizza and games, which my daughter managed. I also owned ‘Just Your Style’ a women’s clothing store.”

Jean moved away from Ritzville after a divorce and went to Newport on the Oregon Coast in 1995. She met John there.

John, originally from Mount Vernon, Washington, had been in the logging business and owned a commercial fishing boat. Five years after they met, John and Jean were married.



*Jean and John Richards enjoy their life making pottery in the small community of Paha.*

It took years for the Richards’ to discover they had a love for pottery. After John sold his fishing business, they met a couple who made pottery. The couple lived in an upstairs apartment of a grocery store.

“They had a kiln in that apartment and they would take the heated pottery out of the kiln, run down the hall and put it in their bathtub to cool,” recalls John. “To be honest, I really think they were lucky they didn’t burn the place down.”

“They had some items which we bought for about \$500, like tongs, gloves, glazing chemicals, 250 pounds of clay and some glazing recipes that didn’t work. With these items we figured we could get started making pottery.”

The Richards were eager to learn more about making pottery. They took some pottery classes for two years, where they say they found

out why the couple’s recipes didn’t work.

They bought some glazing chemicals from a ceramics business that was closing its doors.

“There were about 6,000 molds for sale,” says Jean. “We really didn’t want that many, but to get the ones we wanted we had to take all 6,000. Over time, we’ve sold off some and have whittled it down to a more manageable 300 that we really like. We don’t have a lot of room for storage, so having too much of anything is not a good option.”

The Richards moved to Paha in 2005, where they found a two-car garage for sale, and began to build their future.

John and Jean are now finishing their home. Since their studio—which they call “The Pahattery”—and living quarters share space, it

can be a little confining, but they enjoy living a quiet life with their two dogs and their pottery.

John and Jean can make pottery the traditional way, but they especially like to use the Raku firing process.

Their kiln heats the pottery to about 900 degrees for curing.

A glaze is applied to the pot. While the glaze is applied, a 33-gallon garbage can lined with fire-proof material is readied. A propane-fired burner is set inside a bottom hole to heat the inside of the can.

The pottery is placed on a short heat-resistant ceramic pedestal and heated to about 2,300 degrees. This takes about a half-hour.

Another garbage can is prepared with anything that will get a good burn, such as shredded paper, dried leaves or Christmas wrapping paper. After the pottery becomes transparent through the heating process, it is ready to be placed in the other garbage can, where the hot pot ignites the materials inside the can and the firing begins.

"This process is interesting because we can't predict how it will turn out," says Jean. "We have had the same glaze on two separate pots and they come out of this process looking completely different.

"Then we can do a couple of pots and they will look like twins. I guess that's what makes it so much fun, because we never know."

Another of John and Jean's favorite types of pottery also is unpredictable. The style is done by Navajos, using horse hair.

A pot is placed in the kiln and heated to about 900 degrees. After it comes out of the kiln and set in a safe work area, Jean takes a strand of horse hair and holds it close to the pot. As it gets close, the heated pot will grab the hair and it will attach to the pot.

"We really love this type of pottery because each pot is so unique and, even though we hold the hair close to the same way each time, it will attach itself so differently," says



*Above, Jean shows one of her creations. Below, pottery making requires intense heat in the firing process.*

Jean. "It's fun. We have books with pictures of Navajo pottery that is beautiful. Some of the pictures in these books help us to come up with new ideas."

The Richards know a talented

potter from Monmouth, Oregon, who has helped them with tips and ideas to bring out their creativity. Jean calls one of his pots her "inspiration pot."

"I look at that pot often to get my creative juices flowing, and I'll get the urge to create something special," she says.

The Richards say they don't expect to get rich making pottery, but to make enough money to enjoy retirement, keep busy, grow their own vegetables and listen to the trains as they pass through Paha. ■

*For more information, call John and Jean at the Pabattery: (425) 346-3141.*

