

TODD PIKER FROM CORNWALL... all the way to Cornwall



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“I don’t think you choose pottery. It chooses you.”

Todd Piker is a gentle soul, and his revelation carries the modest sense of a person who can look back on a full life and feel comfortable where the road has taken him.

Pottery chose him, early on, and has never abandoned him. From apprentice to urban transplant to local businessman to respected artist and mentor, Todd has embraced the journey with as much intensity as he leans into a whirling mound of clay and turns it into something of graceful beauty.

To be certain, that road has had its busy intersections and blind curves. Growing up on Long Island, he attended the George School near Philadelphia, a celebrated Quaker boarding school that counts among its illustrious alumni Stephen Sondheim, Julian Bond, Blythe Danner ... and Todd Piker.

Discovering pottery

It was during a summer study tour that Piker first seriously encountered pottery in a two week immersion at a studio at Ways Mills, Quebec. “As a high school student I had an interest in pottery and discovered that I could enroll for a two-week course

at the Rozynska Pottery and study with Wanda Rozynska.” The lifestyle appealed to him, the magnetic draw of working in clay surrounded by like-minded individuals seemed in direct contrast to the competitive crush of a “climbing and clawing” career in the city.

So it was, that armed with a high school diploma and the encouragement of his parents, Todd Piker came to an intersection and turned toward England. He had applied to be an apprentice with one of the most celebrated studio potters in the fine English tradition.

Michael Cardew had been the first apprentice of the man credited with being the “father of contemporary British pottery,” Bernard Leach. Cardew had distinguished himself both in his native England and in Africa where, as the “Blitz” forced potteries to shut down their kilns lest the heat signals attract night time bombing raids, Cardew had enhanced his glowing reputation.

Accepted by Cardew to apprentice in the Wenford Bridge Pottery in Cornwall, England, Todd met and became fast friends with Cardew’s other apprentice, Svend Bayer. By Todd’s description, Bayer was a “natural” and his presence prompted Cardew, the master, to greater artistic heights. “In that short year when I was resident as apprentice #2, I sat at the foot of

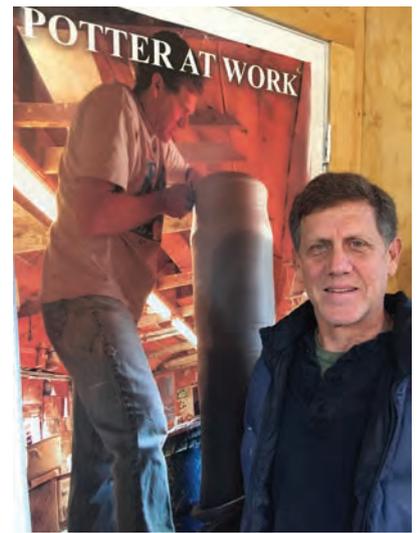
the Sorcerer, but was schooled by his apprentice.”

Apprenticeship year over. Now what?

Apprentice year completed, Piker returned to the US to try his hand at getting his college degree. His student days at Antioch College in Ohio were very short. Back in New York City with a study/internship with *Newsweek*, he sampled the journalism and publishing worlds, abandoning his connection with Antioch and taking up full-time residence in Manhattan where he both worked and enrolled at Hunter College. The time he had spent with Cardew, allowing his spirit to meld into the ways of clay continued to haunt him, however, and while other attractions would take Todd off in new directions, the underlying hunger to be a potter remained a constant.

More important than both his work and his study and his explorations, during this period, Todd met someone who would change his life. Ivelisse Clemente Perez was first a friend of Todd’s younger sister, Kim. Even as he was working in Cornwall, England, Kim visited him and was filled with stories of her new friend – a girl whose background could have hardly been more different than their own.

On his return to the United States,



Above, top to bottom: Todd Piker’s kiln. Todd Piker.

Todd and Ivelisse met for the first time ... and the connection became as tightly bound as the glaze and clay in a high-fired piece of pottery. He had met the love of his life, and years and miles and adventures could not derail the inevitable. They spent time together ... they spent time apart ... but Todd is very clear about the relationship that has lasted through years of marriage, rearing two daughters, and exploring where the journey has taken them. "She's my rock," he says with a casual emphasis that would indicate he came to that realization long ago and has only found the years have confirmed that fact.

Cornwall to Cornwall

The completion of the journey from Cornwall to Cornwall became complete in 1974 when, in partnership with his father and the supporting presence of his dear friend Svend Bayer, the pottery at Cornwall Bridge began to emerge as the realization of a dream.

The rural Cornwall location afforded Todd easy access to the vast amounts of wood required to fire a large kiln. In the 70s there were several saw mills nestled in the Litchfield Hills, each one trying to find ways to dispose of the slabs generated when giant trees were squared in order to cut boards.

The design for the kiln had grown out of dreams and drawings that Svend had begun while they were both apprentices in England. In a true moment of serendipity, the tons of fire bricks required to build the giant arched Sino-Korean inspired "anagama" tunnel kiln were sitting, idle only an hour away from where Piker's

kiln was to be built. Rather than a crippling expenditure of \$50,000 to acquire the specialty brick, \$700 of trucking and hours of back-breaking labor liberated the bricks from being bulldozed into a river and brought them to Cornwall.

Todd and Svend set to work to not only build the kiln, but to create hundreds of pieces of "kiln furniture," the shelves and supports on which their pots would rest during firing. Then, there was the creation of the pots, themselves. Both trained by Michael Cardew, the work reflected his influence and their desire to create utilitarian pieces that would find daily use in the homes of their patrons.

With great anticipation, pride, self-assurance and bravado, the wood at the mouth of the new kiln was lighted and the first firing began. Todd tells the result of that endeavor most succinctly: "After 57 hours of continuous stoking during an unexpected deluge of rain from a passing hurricane we stopped this first effort when we realized all of our remaining wood was soaking wet. During the firing we had watched in horror as pots loaded in the kiln exploded and entire stacks of brick and homemade shelving vanished in a single instant."

Not a great start. But, it was far from the end. Days later, having slept, taken some nourishment and corrected the errors, patched the broken pieces and reordered the contents, they re-fired the kiln. Success is often hard to come by, but each successive firing provided additional learning, tempering, and encouragement.

With the clear, intense focus of creating pieces that people will use, Todd's work has gained wide acceptance and been offered on some of the grandest retail stages. White Flower Farms provided his first major client, followed by Macy's, Bloomingdales, and other high profile retailers.

There was also his own retail venture – the shop in West Cornwall that started in 1984 and became a destination for both local customers and travelers who wandered up and down Route 7. Though the building has recently been sold and Cornwall Bridge Pottery is morphing into a new and quite exciting future as the home



Above: Todd Piker's finished pieces. Below, left: Todd Piker firing his kiln.



of the Institute for the Discovery and Examination of Artistic Sensibility (IDEAS), Todd's pottery remains a constant with assistants and visiting artists working side-by-side with the master, creating elegant, utilitarian pieces and firing in the great anagama kiln that continues to produce wonderful work. A visit to the pottery is an adventure in itself, and the interested are always welcome.

There is an unwritten rule in many sophisticated pottery cultures – notably Korean and Japanese – that it takes generations to become a potter, not years. Todd Piker may be a notable exception to that rule. From the first explorations, experiments, disappointments and disasters, he emerged a widely recognized and respected artist. Svend Bayer returned to England, apprentices and assistants have come and gone, the kiln has been repaired and re-built, recipes for clay and glazes have been refined and refreshed ... and Todd Piker is a man in full – a potter. ●

Explore Todd Piker's work at www.cb pots.com or visit his studio on Route 7, just south of Cornwall Bridge.

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