

MALCOLM Greenwood

Sydney, Australia



Immediately after finishing high school I began a four-year apprenticeship as a fitter and machinist (toolmaker) while studying mechanical engineering part time at night. Early in my first year I realized I didn't want to work at a machine or push a pencil around a drawing board for the rest of my life and that I really wanted to travel and live overseas. I started the long process of gaining admission to a US university to do a bachelor of business administration. During my last semester, I took a class in ceramics. I was hooked! I ended up moving to Boston, Massachusetts, and taking a class with Makoto Yabe. This was an epiphany, and I was now hooked on Japanese ceramics as well.

Ceramics was still a hobby as I worked as an engineer in Boston, then managed a factory in Lagos, Nigeria, before returning to the US for a while. I returned to Australia in 1980 to take over the family engineering business. For the next nine years I worked in the corporate world in engineering, management consulting, and manufacturing.

A few days before Christmas in 1989 I was fired as part of a corporate takeover. It made my decision to be a full-time ceramic artist easier. Feeling totally disillusioned with the corporate world and a traditional career, I needed a dramatic change for my mental and physical health. I walked out to my studio and have been there ever since.

Many people thought giving up my management/engineering career, with its so-called security and large salary was crazy. I have

never regretted this decision in the slightest. While financially it was a struggle at times (until recently my partner was the main bread winner) I was able to (with my partner) be an integral part of my daughters' lives. Being able to take them for a swim after school is priceless!

I think the most difficult decision was at one stage contemplating returning to the corporate world as our financial situation was not good. Fortunately there were not many employment opportunities, so I continued being a full-time potter and we made it through a difficult time.

Daily Routine

My perception of a potter's life has not changed. If anything I am even more grateful for the opportunity to pursue my passion and have an amazing family life. I don't think ceramics is so much a career, but a very privileged lifestyle. When my children were young, I worked around their hours (early morning, during their school day, and at night).

Now my typical work day starts at 5am as I can enjoy both an hour of work with no interruptions and the sounds of the day waking. I then walk to the beach (about 1 mile (2 km) each way) for a ½-mile (1km) swim. I do this all year, summer and winter. I then have breakfast, read the newspaper, am back to work by 8am,

and usually work through to 6 or 7pm. This routine happens pretty much 6 days a week. The paperwork/administrative tasks usually get done after dinner.

At the beginning, my main mode of selling was gift and home-ware trade shows. I usually attended these twice a year, selling to about 100 retail outlets such as homewares, kitchenware, and gift stores, as well as a few restaurants. The trade shows were a great way to sell as potential customers would only stop if they were interested in my work. There is nothing more soul destroying than trying to identify potential customers, knocking on doors, lugging samples, and then getting treated abysmally and being soundly dismissed.

The trade shows kept me very busy until about eight years ago. Then, in 2008, the market just dried up as a result of immense competition from Southeast Asia. Even the very high-end customers were beginning to sell cheaper imported items. That year, I literally had no work.

I had to reinvent myself. I had to identify a market (and designs) where it was either impossible or very difficult for large manufacturers to compete. I identified restaurants to be one of the best opportunities for a client base for custom-designed and handmade tableware. While the quantities these customers need can be large for the studio potter (anywhere from 1 to 1000), these are insignificant for the large manufacturers, who are also rarely able to produce custom designs. They end up not being interested in these kinds of projects. I now supply about 60 restaurants mainly around Australia and only a handful of retail customers.

While I do have a Facebook page, social media plays a very limited role in marketing. My website is only used as a vehicle for potential customers to see images of my work and get an indication of the wide variety of pieces I am able to produce. The website is a great resource when working with customers who are either interstate or sometimes overseas.

Building and Expanding a Market

My relationships with chefs and restaurant owners built up slowly over the years. Fortunately I was already producing work (mainly for Japanese restaurants) when the global trend for distinctive tableware started to gain momentum. I had begun to approach non-Japanese restaurants, as I thought there was an opportunity to increase my sales by applying Japanese aesthetics to the presentation of Australian (European) food. Additionally, I promoted the idea that restaurants could differentiate themselves by using distinctive handmade tableware.

In the early stages having my work in a few very upmarket and leading restaurants, hotels, and cafes made my work very visible and sought after. One of Australia's leading chefs, Brent Savage, was



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1 Malcolm Greenwood cleaning up the top of a form on the jigger jolley.
2 Jigger/jollied and Hakeme slip-decorated porcelain side plates, drying on ware boards in the studio, 2013. 3 Fluted bowl in use at Ormeggio restaurant, Sydney, Australia. 4 Fluted bowls, 9¼ in. (24 cm) in diameter, wheel-thrown porcelain, reduction and oxidation fired to 2372°F (1300°C), 2012.
5 Corrugated Vase, 9¼ in. (24 cm) in height, handbuilt stoneware, salt glazed, wood fired to 2372°F (1300°C), 2008. 4–5 Photos: Steve Cummings.

one of the first chefs to pursue handmade tableware. I have been working with Savage for about six years and his three restaurants all primarily use my tableware. Many new restaurants do their research by going to one of Savage's restaurants.

Another highly visible customer that has had a huge impact on promoting my work is the Baillie group of luxury hotels, particularly Southern Ocean Lodge on Kangaroo Island.

Now I produce work for nearly 60 restaurants, mainly in Australia. The visibility of my work is continuing to snowball as literally thousands of people experience my work daily.

Working with Chefs

In the past I was coming up with new designs, showing them at trade shows and hoping they would be accepted and take off. Some did, and some flopped. However I now get a great opportunity to be creative when responding to particular customer needs.

The process of designing custom ware for a restaurant usually starts with the chef visiting my workshop where we sit down together to discuss their needs. Usually the chef will have some idea about the size and shape they need. I will then show them some samples of my work to demonstrate the variety of shapes and glazes that

are possible and so identify a direction. The type of restaurant, the décor and the food all influence the design of the tableware. These days, as I have gained a lot of experience with restaurants and have many examples to draw on, I get to have quite an influence on the design of the tableware.

The collaboration process is a very rewarding part of my practice, especially if the chef and I have similar ideas about function and aesthetics. It can be very challenging if this is not the case. It can be difficult to pursue a direction I may not like, but this really forces me to open my thinking to different ideas. Regularly a chef will come to me with an idea and an image that will push me down a completely new path. One that still allows me to draw on my experience and past work/ideas, some of which may have been lying dormant for years. While sometimes these different exploratory paths don't work for me at all, other times they open up the most amazing new directions.

Design Work

There are very few production potters left in Australia with the skill and experience to turn an idea into a finished piece. One of my early design customers was amazed to see the first samples and that, while having been thrown, they were all the same size and shape.

Design work evolved separately from my restaurant work. It is a similar sort of work from my point of view. However, in this case, the customer/designer will have a very specific design and style in mind and they come to me for advice and direction on how it can be made, to develop samples or prototypes, and then, in most cases, to actually produce it on an ongoing basis.

In some cases the designer comes with an engineering drawing that I can work from, sometimes with a rough sketch that includes approximate dimensions, and sometimes with their own prototype to reference.

The development and production of lamp shades and a tableware range for Koskela (a design/homeware store in Sydney) and a unique cup and saucer/lid for Vert Design are some of the design projects I have been involved in.

Production, Experimentation, and Cross Pollination

I basically see the time I spend doing production work as my rehearsal time. The discipline of production allows me to continually develop and hone my skills, and have a better understanding and control of my materials (clay and



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6 Rectangular platter, 21¼ in. (54 cm) in length, press-molded and altered stoneware, reduction fired to 2372°F (1300°C), 2009. **7** Plate, 10½ in. (27 cm) in diameter, jigger/jollied porcelain with matte black and ash glaze, reduction fired to 2372°F (1300°C). **8** Ikebana ponds, 15¾ in. (40 cm) in diameter, wheel-thrown stoneware, slips, ash glaze, reduction fired to 2372°F (1300°C), 2012. **6–8** Photos: Steve Cummings.

glazes). The repetition is critical to understanding and control. I do at least one glaze firing each week, so I have an intimate knowledge of the kiln and glazes.

I have developed shapes, textures, and glazes/slips on my exhibition work, which I have then used on the production pieces and vice versa. Recently I have taken a salt slip, which I was using exclusively on exhibition work, and applied it to oxidation fired bowls and cups, to produce a very unique and contemporary finish. One of my Japanese restaurant customers saw some of my wood-fired work and wanted a similar finish on tableware for the restaurant. It really is not economically viable to produce large quantities of wood-fired tableware so I embarked on a path of developing a simulated wood-fired finish.

I have just begun to use a new porcelain for my tableware. Its amazing whiteness in reduction has stimulated all sorts of ideas of how I can use this new material in my exhibition work—when I get time!

Traditional galleries have all but disappeared in Australia. As a result there is a very limited demand for exhibition work and I have had to look to other avenues for opportunities. This has meant doing an exhibition with an Ikebana artist, creating a stream in a public gallery for the opening reception of a major exhibition, and working with an architect to create some sculptural work for a restaurant.

Advice

After finishing some basic ceramics training/education, be prepared to serve an apprenticeship with an experienced, successful (busy) production potter to hone/develop your skills and to learn all the tricks about making ceramics for a living, including the business end. This will probably include a lot of menial work and a lot of practice alone on your own time.

career snapshot

Years as a professional full-time potter: 26

Number of pots made in a year: 10,000+ (with some assistance)

Education:

Bachelors degree in business administration

Mechanical Engineering certificate

Fitting and Machining Trade certificate

Studied ceramics with Makoto Yabe, Boston, Massachusetts

the time it takes

Making work (including firing): 80%

Promotions/Selling: 15%

Office/Bookkeeping: 5%

where it goes

Retail Stores: 1%

Galleries: 1%

Studio/Home Sales: 2%

Directly to restaurants, hotels, and cafes: 96%

where to see more

Koskela (*Licht* pendant lighting), Rosebery, NSW, Australia
www.koskela.com.au

Sturt Gallery, Mittagong, NSW, Australia
www.sturt.nsw.edu.au

Selected restaurants and hotels:

Bentley Restaurant, Yellow, Monopole, Firedoor, Ormeggio, Rockpool, Bennelong, Masuya Group, Rengaya, Southern Ocean Lodge, Capella Lodge, Longitude 131, Single Origin Roasters, Patricia's Coffee Brewers, Park Hyatt Hotel, Nomad, Aqua Dining, Pulu, Via Alta, Bathers Pavilion

learn more

www.malcolmgreenwood.com

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