

Preparing Pots for Smoke firing

A Quick Guide

What clay?

As a general rule, use clay which has some resistance to thermal shock. So any clay suitable for raku would be excellent. Earthstone ES5 is very good as well. If you are not sure, check the properties of your clay online. Does it have grogg? If it does, it is likely to have some resistance to thermal shock. That being said, if you keep your pieces under 500-600g, even porcelain will probably withstand the firing, but there will be a greater risk of cracking. White/off white clay will show markings best but any colour can be used. You can even colour the clay body if you like.

What shape?

It's up to you, but curved shapes tend to smokefire better than slab sided surfaces, simply because the fire can flow around the vessel better. Bowls are ok but the insides can be problematic to get a really nice result. Unless you are determined to include them, avoid adding things that stick out too much (such as large fragile handles) because pieces can move during the firing. Remember the pieces will be low fired and remain porous and, even though I will recommend you a sealant, they are never really fully functional on a day to day basis, so make something that's decorative as opposed to something you would eat or drink from.

What size?

Keep the pieces to around 500-600g max. This is only so we can fit everyone in. Bring up to three vessels and we will try and fit them in. It will depend on how many people want to fire work.

How to prepare?

Smokefired objects look fabulous if they are burnished as they dry. Use any smooth object such as the back of a spoon, a polished stone or even a lightbulb. When you trim your piece at leather hard stage, use a rubber rib to smooth the surface and remove pin holes, scratches or other imperfections. If the surface is too dry, moisten with a sponge to help this process. When the vessel is dry enough to burnish without denting the surface, rub gently all over with your chosen implement. Keep burnishing to compress the surface and bring up a shine. Rub with a soft cloth between burnishes. You can choose to proceed to a high shine, or stop at a light sheen. It's up to you. If you have terra sigillata, you can also use this to add shine (it also intensifies colour in the fire). Brush on several coats and burnish in between coats. Youtube has lots of tutorials on how to apply.

It is fine to leave your surfaces rough or textured if that is what you prefer. Bear in mind that as no glaze will be applied, the surface of your finished piece will appear drier as a result. Wax finishes don't work on rougher surfaces but a coat of shellac or oil for ceramic surfaces can be used on these surfaces to intensify the end result.

When the vessel is dry, bisque fire to 1000C maximum. Bring that with you. If you want to fire your vessel alongside anything specific, bring that with you too. Items include seaweed, leaves, moss, copper carbonate and salt. I can advise you how to use these things to best effect during the demonstration.

If you want to ask me any other questions, email me at : Janenewaudby@yahoo.co.uk