

# a take on the tour

by Ryan Strobel



On my way home from the Saint Croix Valley Pottery Tour, I was asked by an eight-year-old if I had liked it. I'd been in Minnesota for five days, helping with the tour as an apprentice to Simon Levin, one of the forty-four potters participating. I'd just seen more pottery in one week than I'd seen previously in my entire life. I'd met most of my pottery idols, including Warren MacKenzie and Clary Illian. I had feasted, meal after meal, at tables full of wonderful food and pots, surrounded by wonderful potters. I'd experienced a stronger pottery community than I had known existed, and I had left feeling as though I was now part of it. I didn't quite know what to say. I said, "Well... it was like going to Disney World." But I don't think that quite captured it.

My experience at the tour had a profound impact on me. I had expected artistic inspiration. I'd expected to spend long hours looking at and holding great pots, soaking up ideas and information. But what I felt was much more. I was inspired by the potters themselves – shining examples of people who have walked farther down the path I'm on, living good, meaningful lives. And I was inspired by the incredible community represented by the tour: not only the potters but also the pottery users, the pottery lovers, and the pottery fans – an informed and educated public who appreciates the work and is hungry for it. I was amazed that on the opening Friday, which was frigid and rainy, people came in droves. They hovered around the

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tables of pots, dripping and cold, seemingly intent on giving each one careful consideration. I saw a young woman walking through snow hugging a big Matt Kelleher fry-pan bowl, with a huge smile on her face because she had just found her newest prized possession. I stood around the hot coffee and hibiscus tea, warming up with other potters and guests who spoke excitedly about the pots they'd seen or bought at another stop on the tour. I left Minnesota feeling nourished and inspired.

Not long after I began making pots, I recall considering what it would be like to become a "real" potter. I thought of myself as a social creature, and I thought it unfortunate that to do what I was falling in love with might be against my nature. My image of the full-time studio potter was that of a hermit, working away in solitude and only occasionally emerging into the world to sell pots. But now, especially after experiencing this spectacular event and the Minnesota pottery community and culture that it represents, I realize that relationships are inherent to working in clay.

To buy a piece of functional pottery is to invite that handmade object into the intimate space of one's home life. To make a piece of pottery is to consider the moments we share a cup of coffee or a meal with other people as truly important moments. The potter's work enables social behavior: we fill tables with plates and bowls and cups and pitchers to serve and welcome guests. To be able to sit at the table with other people who strive to infuse everyday life with a little more beauty and thoughtfulness was humbling. This common goal has fostered a "clay family" that in Minnesota can be easily traced back to its grandfather, Warren Mackenzie. His love of making pots and desire to share that love with others has created an admirable foundation for those of us who seek to join the practice.



I left the tour full of confidence: confidence that this is a good and worthy path, and that I will be able to make a living at it. I left thinking that wherever I decide to settle and set up a studio, I will be part of a clay community. The important network that I experienced at the tour has no state borders or geographical restrictions. Where a clay community does not exist, it can be built, and to be successful it does not need to be as big or as strong as the one in Minnesota. Building a community and educating a community don't have to happen in revolutionary ways. When I have a sale in my hometown in Maine, someone who knew nothing of wood-fired pottery will leave knowing something about it, and that person may even leave with a pot and an appreciation that she'll share with others. I see the spirit of the tour as infectious and wanting to spread by its own generous nature. It is rooted in the home. It is like an open table, full of food and drink served in beautiful handmade pots, welcoming all to come and feast.



**TOP:** *Cups, wood-fired, 2010.*

**ABOVE:** *Rustic Bottle, wood-fired, 2010.*

**OPPOSITE:** *Potters Ryan Strobel and Dick Cooter at Guillermo Cuellar's studio.*