

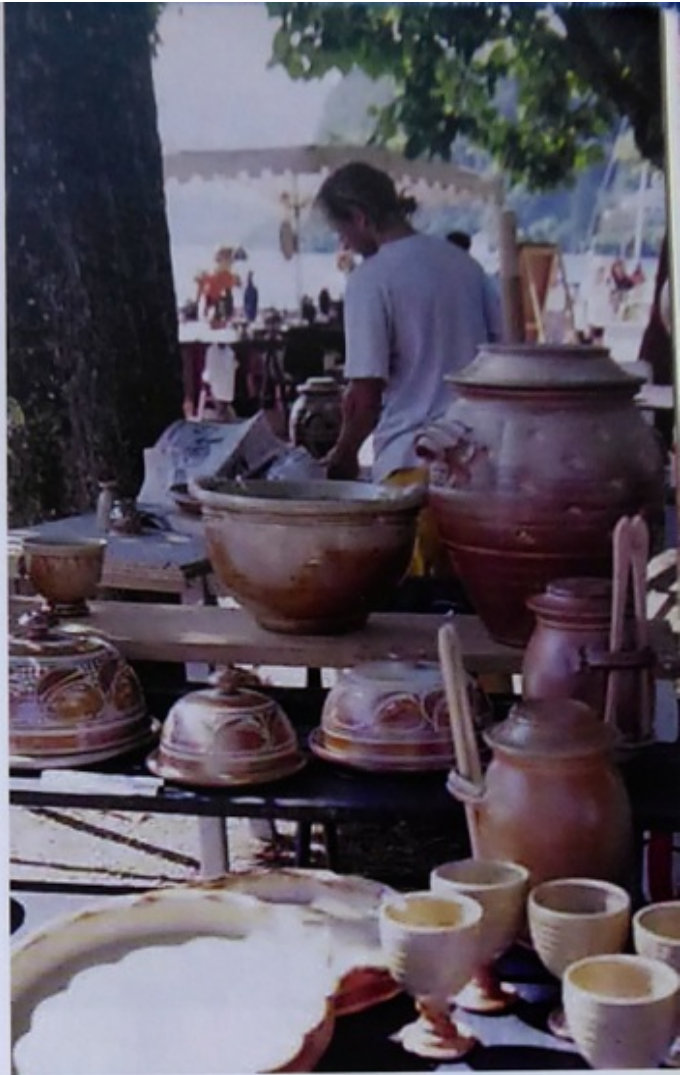
Potters' Markets of France

Jane Annois has been attending these markets and finds potters who enjoy both sales and camaraderie

THE CONCEPT OF POTTERS TAKING CONTROL of their own sales and marketing may not be new, but the French have developed it with style. With strength of numbers through their regional potters' associations they have organised a system of markets, following careful guidelines. These markets occur throughout France in the most picturesque of settings during the summer months. Over the past 20 years, this has become a phenomenon which has grown from the simple beginnings of a few potters joining forces to promote their work, enjoy each other's company and perhaps make a little money.

The first potters' markets at Cliouscat, in Provence, paved the way for the style of market which was to follow. An ancient, charming village with a history of *terre vernisse* (the decorated earthenware particular to the area) set the scene for a celebration of pottery and the village itself, enhanced, of course, by food, wine and games of petanque. Each year more customers and sales have followed. Other regional potters associations from all over France have taken up the cause, maintaining the high standards and the spirit of the original potters.

French ceramic artists have suffered a period during which numerous galleries supporting ceramics have closed, tightening the circle of exhibitions to the few elite or well established artists. At the same time many of the tertiary institutions ceased to offer a specialised course in ceramics. There are now only a few courses which remain. Potters were concerned that the work and cultural validity of the studio potter was under threat. They felt a desperate need to meet, learn from each other, to promote and sell their work, and to provide the opportunity for discussion and debate. The markets provided the opportunity to gather and share ideas. The pleasure of celebrating one's craft together created an infectious ambience. This is also felt by the clientele who come to the markets to embrace the spirit, meet the potters, buy a beautiful piece and share a part of the potters' lifestyle.



Roland Bottani from La Borne with his woodfired ceramics at the market at Pierre de Bresse.



*The market at Seguret,
Provence, in mid
summer.*

Since Cloucat, 20 years ago, the number of markets has increased, spreading all over France. From humble beginnings, the markets are now sophisticated events, demanding high standards of professionalism and presentation from participating potters. Major ceramic exhibitions in nearby galleries are held concurrently to create a broader ceramic focus. As a result, potters are now able to sell the work they want to make, and are able to live from this work. There are few who need to take on part-time jobs to support themselves. A general consensus is that about 50 per cent of the potters' income is derived from the markets, the rest from studio sales and galleries.

The guidelines for the markets are quite clear. Although each association will vary in the detail, the core concept is the same. It is not the associations which organise the markets but the potters who come from the area where the market is held. However, they must consult with the association for approval.

Markets are also held in liaison with the local tourist office and the municipality. It is important that a market is held in a particular area only once a year. Associations are wary of markets being held too often or in towns too close to each other. They do not want to lose the uniqueness of the event. As the popularity has grown there is now a

danger of overdoing it. If greed is allowed to prevail, it could destroy the essence of why the markets were established. As they exist now, participating French potters are able to represent themselves and their work, in their own manner, uninhibited by dictates of galleries or fashion. They actively promote ceramics both as an art form and a career. Potters need to be professional and business-like to uphold the quality of their work and their prices.

This summer of 2000 will be the third time I will have participated in potters' markets in France. One of the most enjoyable features of the markets is the ambience. There is always a welcoming coffee and croissant to share with fellow potters on arrival, an aperitif at the end of the day at the market, before heading off for dinner together at a local restaurant. Lunchtime is sacred. The customers dwindle, then go into hiding until 2pm. Often the organisers will pull out a couple of tables into the middle of the market, and load it with a feast and wines for the potters. Local potters will usually host those who have travelled long distances to the market. At the market held at the Chateau of Pierre de Bresse in 1999, a wing of the chateau was transformed into a dormitory. The two to three days spent in each others' company can be the reward for lengthy periods of time spent working, usually in isolated conditions, in the studio.

Markets vary enormously. Those held in Provence in high summer are hot and crowded. The setting is usually spectacular. Seguret is an ancient village originally built by the Romans, perched on a cliff overlooking Vaison-la-Romaine. This walled city is entered by cobble-stoned roads. Fountains, many hundreds of years old, form the backdrop for contemporary ceramic sculptures. Past intimate bars and restaurants and into the town square lies the

pottery market, shaded by plane trees, which have been cleverly trained to form a canopy overhead. When we were there a wandering minstrel playing the accordion serenaded us. Cars line the steep ascent to the village for many kilometres. Customers shelter in the shade, with pots by their sides and a drink in their hands, waiting for the heat of the day to lose its ferocity before making the long walk back to the car. Here there are perhaps 40 potters, about half from surrounding areas and half who have travelled for up to three hours which, in French terms, is a long way.

To the northeast is a village, Menthon St Bernard, on the water's edge. It faces Annecy across the lake, and looks towards the mountains of the Swiss Alps. The water here is said to be the purest in Europe. The nearby mountains are more often covered with snow than not. This is different from Provence but just as breathtaking. An intimate market of no more than 35 potters, it attracts a loyal clientele. Potters do well here. Roland Bottani from La Borne has made a five-hour journey to sell his woodfired, salt-glazed stoneware. Again there is a mix of styles, and I am impressed with the general knowledge of our customers; there is no need for long explanations about technique.

The market at Lyon, held in September, is one of the last for the year. The market's title *Tupiniers de Vieux-Lyon* refers to the potters who worked in the district dating from the 13th century. It is interesting to note that, while excavating to build a new school not far from the site of the market, an old pottery was unearthed which is thought to be more than 2000 years old. Pots, raw but intact were found, the potters' working areas were clearly laid out, and brick kilns were still in place.

And the potters live on. The market at Lyon is one of the biggest. In 1999, it attracted 160 exhibitors from all over France. It is also well attended, an event on the calendar of a city second in size only to Paris. It is held in the cobblestoned square in the old quarter, outside the Cathedral of Saint-Jean.

The market at Pierre de Bresse was quieter. This is a small village a long way from a major centre, in Bourgogne. Amid the vineyards famous for their red wines, the market happens to coincide with the 'vendange', the grape harvest. While waiting for our first customers we taste the 'bourru', the new wine made from crushed grapes before they start to ferment. The local houses are known for their steep roofs, with distinctive clay tiles. This is where the silica-rich white clay is found, prized by potters who use it for white slip over terracotta, when making 'terre vernisse'. The market is held in the courtyard of a chateau, now functioning as an ecomuseum. Surrounded by a fish-filled moat, and forests once sporting wild deer, the chateau is imposing for its architectural grandeur and its pre-revolution history. Now the potters have their day, filling the courtyard with their wares.

One wing of the chateau holds a ceramic exhibition, entitled *Végétal*, part of a series held in different venues in Bourgogne on the theme; *Animal, Végétal,*



*Decorative pots at
Tupiniers de
Vieux-Lyon.*



Top: The market at Seguret, Provence, in mid summer. Above: Jane Annois and Jean-Marc Plantier with their work at Pierre le Bresse.

Mineral. Two years earlier, the exhibition took the form of a series of eight installations, when ceramic artists could interpret 'the dinner party' reinventing the interior of an entire room to suit their theme, of course, in clay.

Each market has its own style, depending on where it is held and its organising body. I believe there is much we can learn from the experiences of the French potters who have been through similar difficulties to potters everywhere. At a time when we are seeing the number of galleries diminish, we need another means of promoting our businesses and ourselves. In France there is now a greater interest in ceramics, and more potters are living from their craft. New galleries are opening again. Can we begin to turn the tide in other parts of the world?

REFERENCES:

- Les Tablettes de D'ARGILES – Advice on the preparation of the market.
- Convention of the Potters' Market, Jean Jacques Dubernard, President of D'ARGILES. June newsletter of D'argiles.

Jane Annois spent five months working in France during 1999, exhibiting and taking part in several potters' markets. She is organising a potters' market in Warrandyte, Melbourne, for the weekend 24 and 25 February 2001. For information and application forms, fax: 03 9844 2339 or send a self-addressed envelope to 111 Research Rd, Warrandyte, Vic 3113.