



TAKURO SHIBATA

(b. 1972 in the Osaka Prefecture, Japan) brings a sculptural artistry to even his most functional pottery. This Seagrove potter's graceful work is so assured that it's startling to realize that he also works full-time as the director of STARworks Ceramics in nearby Star, North Carolina.

Before STARworks, potters in North Carolina mostly ordered their clay from large national concerns who source powdered minerals from various states, mix them together, and ship the resulting clay to potters all over the United States. Only a handful of potters in the Seagrove area—with a keen interest in traditional claymaking and the equipment and know-how to do it—made their own clay from local sources. But in 2008, when Takuro's nonprofit organization secured a small grant, he began assembling a local clay factory. He sourced local clays from small towns like Candor and Cameron, refined his methods, and assembled the

machinery. Now, he and his team provide a series of ten local, wild clays for sale to the general public and mix special “bespoke” clays for potters with particular needs. The wild clay is making a name for itself—and interest is growing (see p. xxx).

With a degree in engineering and applied chemistry from Doshisha University in Kyoto and an apprenticeship with potter Hozan Tanii at Tanikan Gama Pottery under his belt, he is perfectly suited to the task of making clay. He can field potters' technical and scientific and aesthetic questions, because of his background in chemistry and engineering and as a

studio potter. He is passionate about the clay he's making. "It's unique. Some people appreciate and look for the natural aspect of local, wild clays," he says. "This clay is for them." The Shibatas, both potters, produce all of their work using wild clay, handmade ash glazes (see recipe on p. xxx), and local scrap wood.

Stepping back for a moment to look back on the dozen years he and his wife have been in Seagrove, Takuro acknowledges that they've come a long way since he worked to clean and prepare an abandoned hosiery mill in Star, North Carolina. The STARworks team has developed a ceramics store and clay factory. At the home he and his wife helped to build, his growing brood now includes two rambunctious young sons, two cats, and even chickens. Out back, he and his wife work nearby using two wood-fired kilns that they built with knowledge

they gained helping other potters build kilns in Japan, Virginia, and Seagrove, and from books they studied at night and on weekends. "It was so challenging, especially at first," he remembers. "Just making one phone call was so difficult for me at first." But they met friends and neighbors who helped them out. "Because of friends here like architects Frank Harmon and Jacob Burke, and our mortgage lender who had faith in us, and the wisdom of our local contractor and carpenters, we were able to do it. We built our home." The appreciation is mutual. "Takuro is the absolute nicest person I know!" local ceramic engineer Steve Blankenkemper affirms. "His gentle nature, kindness and willingness to help potters with every facet of pottery making have been a great asset to artists in the Seagrove area and around the country."

*Quote from Larry Wheeler here. Venihit qui ut esto blam
fugitis eos debis sitaeperum cum exceperferum es am dolupta
volecupta in nihillabo. Itate enectur? Quia es dignis raerum
volessumque vid et aliscillant resedit hilique ipientem faci occulpa
rchicab oribusda qui repudi to es quodi blab illorem ad quod ut od*

LAWRENCE J. WHEELER, PHD

Steve Blankenkemper is a local ceramic engineer with a passion for pottery. He's worked with some of the Seagrove area potters who dig their own clay, like Hitomi and Takuro Shibata, Ben Owen III, and Fred Johnston. "Steve Blankenkemper show up in our lives, he is like an angel, a clay angel of sorts," Johnston raves. "Steve has given us access to all this new material, it's like a Renaissance in a

way, with what Takuro is doing as well." Blankenkemper explains NC clays this way: "Clay mining is an art, because nature is not perfectly adapted for pottery. You take from the earth what it gives you, and you find a way to work with it. Clays are sticky or not sticky, melt at high temperature or low temperature, burn different colors. So what Takuro and I do is see what nature gives us and

then see what needs to be done to it to make it a good ceramic clay. Each clay is different. Each mine site is different. And hopefully you can come up with something new and exciting that burns a new color, throws better than most clays, has some unique property. What we try to do is bring something new to the table. And I will tell you that potters recognize when something good comes along!"





