



Photo by Kitty Leaken

The Hand of An Artisan

by Katharine Kagel – published in *Local Flavor* November-December 1998

There wasn't a single metal pot or pan to be found in my Velarde valley neighbor's kitchen. Just row after row of plank shelving running the length of the rich adobe walls holding piles of platters, yawning bowls, bean pots and casseroles all made of clay. They were coppery, black, and gingerbread in color. My neighbor's stove was awash in these clay cook pots that were steaming and sputtering our evening's meal. As a Luddite chef, one who is entranced by simple authentic traditions, I knew I had to learn all I could about these wonders.

What were these vessels made of that they could cook over the high flame of gas burners? They looked like pueblo pottery, but my experience with those had been limited to decorative pieces. I counted more than two dozen of these clearly handmade beauties in every size and shape, with many wonderfully large pieces intended for feasting. I thought to myself, this unique cookware bespeaks the hand of an artisan who not only cooks, but who understands utility and the aesthetics of the curve.

Questions poured out of me: who made these, what are they made of, is there a flavor transfer from the clay to the food, do they hold up, what tradition are they from, how are they made?

My host was stirring a big pot of red chile with a long wooden spoon and had that proud satisfied smile of a collector as he offered me a taste from the pot. "These are the work of Felipe Ortega -

he's Apache and Hispanic and lives up north in the village of La Madera. These are traditional Jicarilla Apache mica cook pots. He's the father of the resurrected mica tradition." The chile was smooth, fruity, and deep with an earthy flavor. "He teaches how to make these at the Community College in Espanola. My wife and I are going to take his course; you ought to consider it, too. By the way, he makes the best hornos... Felipe understands clay." So I signed up for the class and I called Felipe to build an horno (a beehive-shaped outdoor adobe oven) for me.

Felipe's eyes sparkle and every word he speaks is through lips that are in a perpetual smile. Vibrantly healthy, his strong arms encircled with a half dozen Native silver bracelets, each of a carefully chosen unique design, he gesticulates wildly, racing around the large hornos as he loads them with dozens of loaves of bread he is making for a nearby pueblo's feast day. He is at once intent yet relaxed. In his late forties he seems half his age. With his unlined bronzed face, pony tail, hot pink T-shirt, shorts and sandals he radiates a deep joy for living. Felipe's life is tied absolutely to the year's cycle of celebrations - family, community, religious. He is a penitente at the La Madera Morada, a seminary trained but not ordained priest, healer, baker, and traditional yet innovative micaceous potter. He finds time to teach in Europe every year, taking along five hundred pounds of micaceous clay. Last year he taught in Switzerland and next year he plans on adding classes in Germany.

My horno was built in a process that took five visits. Soon with the capacity of an oven floor that held twenty-five loaves, we were using the oven for all sorts of meals. The meal we most enjoyed was Felipe's recipe for the juiciest and most flavorful roasted chicken, done in twenty minutes, pizzas unparalleled, and roasted garden corn, with acorn squash for dessert. Christmas Eve we fired the pots I made in class in my living room fireplace. As Felipe used tongs to pull out the red-hot pots he said to one of the guests, "Quick! Hand me ten hairs from your head!" (She had very long coarse hair.) As soon as the pot emerged from the flames he tossed the hair against the extremely hot exterior walls of the pot, where they sizzled and smoked, and disappeared, leaving a squiggly thin black decorative tracing. Pure alchemy.

Once I cooked in clay I knew I'd never be able to cozy up to a Calphalon again. Mica pots are made from naturally occurring mica clay; wherever there are volcanoes, there is micaceous clay. Felipe digs his clay from the same mica clay pits that his ancestors have used for some 400 years. Whenever he extracts the clay he offers a traditional prayer of thanks. The clay is very smooth with the consistency of whipped honey-butter. The forms begin with a tortilla-shaped, hand patted clay bottom. Next, coils are made mid-air between the palms, then layered using scraping tools to attach the coils. His dead-on eye makes exquisitely symmetrical thin walled shapes. More scraping ensues and then a vigorous sanding with a piece of limestone, (picked up from the side of the road near Ojo Caliente) finally, the pot is "slipped" with a water-thinned coating of the clay, then the surfaces burnished using a shiny-smooth stone. This is the pots' only finish; there is no other glaze employed in the process. Firing is done outside in the late afternoon when the winds kick up to help make the hottest possible fire. The pots are laid out under bark and split logs - ponderosa pine for a coppery-pink luster, or oak for a subtle yellow-gold color. Often Felipe uses a reduction method, smothering the pots with juniper boughs to make an all-over black finish. At temperatures of 1600 degrees Fahrenheit the silica in the clay melts and vitrifies the vessel making it impervious to liquid.

I have used my ever growing collection of Ortegas for beans, layered casseroles, soups, baked apples, cobblers, batters, stews, sautéed veggies, and salads. Felipe's favorite pintos are made with spring water and dry-land framed beans. No seasonings are added since the mica gives a sweet, earthy yet salty flavor all its own. The clay body is forgiving and inherently durable. Curiously, the handles and rims do not retain heat - so it is easy to transfer the finished meal from the stove right to table for service. I've used the mica cook pots on top of electric and gas stoves, in conventional and microwave ovens. Stirring the pot with a wooden implement is incredibly satisfying. With each stir, I'm mindful of the tradition, of the fused shaped mud, water, wind fire, and spirit. Now, that's nourishment for both the diner and cook - local flavor indeed.

Katharine Kagel is the founding executive chef/owner at Café Pasqual's and the exclusive representative for Felipe Ortega's work which is available at her gallery. Galeria El Zócalo, 103 East Water Street, Santa Fe, NM

