

# Versatility and Mindfulness

# THE CERAMIC BOWL

by Alex Olson

I love ceramic bowls for their versatility. They can serve as teabowls, prep bowls in the kitchen, or vessels for soup, salad, hearty one-bowl meals . . . the list goes on! The bowls I make are thrown on the wheel, faceted, and then textured using found objects such as shells and stones. Designing each piece is a playful process, as I create compositions with facets, textures, and converging surfaces. The resulting forms have a tactile quality that makes them a delight to hold in one's hands—a quality that I hope encourages slowing down and mindfulness while connecting with loved ones over a shared beverage or meal, or sitting in a moment of solitude.

My artwork is driven by my curiosity about the rhythms of the natural world and the intersections of landscape and home. In my work, I focus on crafting functional forms that people can integrate into their daily routines and rituals. Being especially drawn to clay's malleability, I explore concepts of mark making and imprinting through both process and form: found objects from the landscape make physical marks in the clay, leaving imprints of place on my pottery. Atmospheric firing methods like wood firing add complexity to the faceted surfaces, creating gradients of color and texture that mimic patterns in nature. More broadly, while making my work, I consider how experiences in nature stay with us in transformative ways—and how we hold on to those experiences by bringing elements of the natural world into our homes.

## Throwing

Begin by centering a 2½-pound ball of clay on the wheel. Open up the form by pressing one or two fingers into the center of the clay and slowly drawing them toward you and in a slightly upward direction. With a series of pulls, press your fingertips together and draw the clay upward, shaping the bowl so it has a consistent thickness of about ½ inch, and it measures about 6 inches in diameter and 3½ inches tall (1).

Next, use a curved rib tool to remove excess slip from the bowl's interior and compress the clay at the bottom of the bowl (2).



Wood-fired bowls, 3¾ in. (9.5 cm) in diameter each, porcelain, shino liner glaze, wood-fired to cone 10 in reduction, 2021.



1 Center a ball of clay and open the form. Shape the bowl with a series of pulls.



2 Remove excess slip from the interior (curved rib) and exterior walls (metal rib).



3 Use a damp chamois cloth to smooth the bowl's rim.



4 With a carving bow, carve a facet following the curvature of the bowl's interior.



5 Move the bow outward and remove the piece of clay. Check for thickness.



6 With each subsequent facet, overlap the carving bow with the previous facet.



7 Experiment with leaving sections of the bowl unfaceted.



8 Trim the bowl on a spinning banding wheel so the foot is slightly concave.



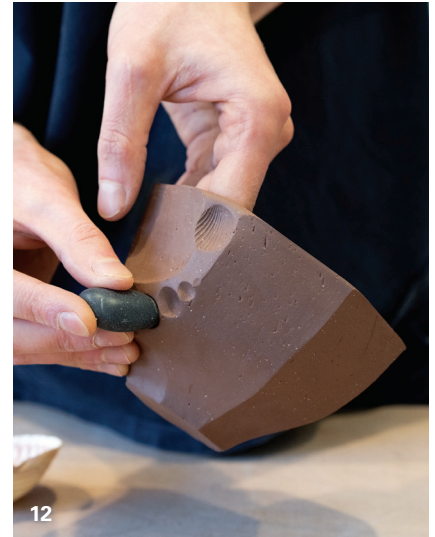
9 With a thin fettling knife, refine the shape and size of the foot.



10 With the pad of a finger, smooth all edges and surfaces to your liking.



11 Add texture to the bowl by pressing objects into the thicker portions of the form.



12 Support the wall on the bowl's interior directly behind the area you're texturing.



13 Roll the bowl at an angle to add a slight bevel to the foot to give it lift.



14 Apply a food-safe liner glaze to the bowl's interior.



15 Use a damp sponge to wipe off any drips from the rim and the outside of the bowl.

Then, remove excess slip from the bowl's exterior with a metal rib, and clean up the base of the form with a wooden modeling tool. Drape a damp chamois over the rim and press down gently to round the corners (3). Drag a taut wire under the bowl, lift it off the wheel with two hands, and place it on a clean ware board. Leave uncovered to allow the bowl to firm up slightly.

## Faceting

Knowing when a piece is ready to facet takes practice, and depends on the moisture content of the clay and your studio's climate. I typically consider a piece ready when it has a little rigidity to it, but the wire of the carving bow still glides through the clay without much resistance. If the clay is too wet, the shape of the bowl can deform easily; if it's too dry, it can be difficult to smoothly carve a facet.

To begin the faceting process, center the bowl on a banding wheel on a work surface at a comfortable standing height.

**Tip:** I like to have the surface of the banding wheel positioned about 1 inch below my elbow. Hold one side of the banding wheel with one hand, and with the other hand, position the carving bow so that the wire portion of the tool partially overlaps the rim of the bowl. Then, in one smooth motion, press the carving bow downward and gradually more and more inward to carve a facet following the curvature of the bowl's interior (4). Once the carving bow reaches the banding wheel's surface, move it outward and remove the piece of clay (5). Check the facet's wall thickness with thumb and forefinger—the thinnest portion should be about  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch thick. Continue carving facets around the bowl's exterior, slightly overlapping the wire of the carving bow with the previous facet (6).

To help make your facets smooth and to avoid carving holes in the side of your piece, visualize the bowl's inner profile as you carve. Treat carving like a dance that involves the whole body: loosen up, bend your knees a little, and don't be afraid to allow

your weight to shift alongside your arm's movement. When carving the last few facets, use a finger to support the bowl's rim to help prevent the bowl from deforming.

As you work your way around the form, experiment with leaving sections of the bowl unfaceted. To do this, start carving a facet, and then ease the carving bow out of the clay once it is partway down the form. In another stroke, press the carving bow into the clay farther down the form to create a facet that goes all the way to the bowl's foot (7). These thicker areas can serve as a canvas for adding texture, as well as a great spot to rest a thumb while using the finished bowl.



**Top:** Wood-fired bowl, 3¾ in. (9.5 cm) in diameter, porcelain, shino liner glaze, wood fired to cone 10 in reduction, 2021.

**Above:** Pair of faceted bowls, 3¾ in. (9.5 cm) in diameter (each), stoneware, white liner glaze, fired to cone 6 in oxidation, 2021.

## Trimming and Refining

After faceting is complete, wire off the bowl from the banding wheel and gauge the thickness of the walls with your fingers to prepare for trimming. Place the bowl upside-down in the center of the banding wheel and secure the bowl with three coils of clay. Give the banding wheel a spin and use a trimming tool to trim the bottom of the foot so it's slightly concave (8). The trimming tool will slow the spinning, so you may need to give the banding wheel an extra spin or two. With a thin fettling knife, remove any extra wall thickness near the base of the bowl and refine the shape and size of the foot (9).

## Smoothing and Texturing

With the pad of a finger, smooth all of the edges and surfaces to your liking. The edges between facets are sometimes wobbly from the carving process, so this step can help make these edges more fluid (10).

Assemble any objects you would like to use as texturing tools. When texturing, it's best if the clay is dry enough so your texturing tool doesn't get stuck in the clay, but malleable enough so that the clay doesn't crack at the tool's perimeter. Add texture to the bowl by pressing the objects into the softer and thicker portions of the form, whether it's on the ridges between facets or on unfaceted portions of the bowl (11). When creating each mark, always have a couple fingers supporting the wall on the bowl's interior directly behind the area you're texturing (12). Experiment with repeating marks and varying the size/depth of the impressions. Once you're done texturing, roll the bowl at an angle to add a slight bevel to the foot (13). This bevel will give the bowl a sense of lift, separating it from the surface it sits on.

## Dry, Fire, and Glaze

Loosely cover the bowl with a plastic sheet to allow it to dry slowly for a couple days. Afterward, uncover the bowl and let it dry completely before bisque firing. Then, use 200- and 400-grit wet/dry sandpaper to soften any edges that feel too sharp and to further refine the shape and surface of the facets. Make sure to keep the piece wet to avoid breathing in any ceramic dust. Thoroughly wash off all ceramic dust particles from the piece with water and let the piece dry at least one hour before glazing.

Next, apply a food-safe liner glaze to the bowl's interior (14) and use a damp sponge to wipe off any drips from the rim and the outside of the bowl (15). Carefully run the sponge around the rim to create a crisp boundary where the liner glaze meets the unglazed rim. I often leave the rims and exteriors of bowls unglazed to showcase the look and feel of the clay, as well as to highlight the intricacies of the textural marks.

Once your piece is glaze fired, use wet/dry sandpaper on the unglazed portions of the bowl to achieve your desired level of smoothness. Then, it's ready for use to enjoy a scoop of ice cream, a bowl of soup . . . something tasty!

*Alex Olson makes pottery and works as a freelance photographer/videographer in Brooklyn, New York. He studied studio art at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, where he focused on ceramics, photography, and woodworking. To see more, check out [www.alexolsonarts.com](http://www.alexolsonarts.com) and follow him on Instagram at [@alex\\_olson\\_arts](https://www.instagram.com/alex_olson_arts).*