



Building on a hot idea

POTTER TURNS HOME HEATING INTO SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL

By Renée Francoeur

THE WORD kachelofen doesn't mean anything to most people outside of Europe.

But it should, especially for cold-braving Canadians, says Jessica Steinhäuser, owner of Stonehouse Pottery in Guelph, who believes she may be the only creator of handmade kachelöfens in North America.

Kachelöfens — pronounced kah-kel-low-fen — are special clay-tiled ovens that burn wood extremely efficiently. They have been heating homes and castles throughout Eastern Europe for more than 600 years.

Steinhäuser's versions have a bonus. Not only do they supply heat, but they are also works of art. Tiles can be colourful or adorned with poetry or sketches. One of her more recent creations, on display at the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre in Guelph, looks like a canvas strewn with whimsical pencil sketches by another local artist.

At Stonehouse Pottery, Steinhäuser's studio on Woolwich Street in downtown Guelph, beneath the thundering floors of the Royal City School of Ballet and Theatre Jazz, the dusty, earthen smell of moist clay fresh out of the box fills the back work room.

Throughout the studio, the walls are covered with photos, notes and her wide-ranging types of art: from elaborate clay clocks that look like they're out of Alice in Wonderland to modern paintings with handwritten backgrounds and big-eyed puppet-like people.

In the showroom, behind her shelves of handmade mugs and other porcelain or



Photography • Dean Palmer

CREATIVE PROCESS

Jessica Steinhäuser uses a wooden jig to smooth and shape clay in her Guelph studio (right). The clay will eventually be part of a one-of-a kind ceramic wood stove, called a kachelofen (closeup above).



Photography • David Bebee

terracotta dishes, a cream-coloured tower stands against an indigo wall, over two metres high, nearly touching the ceiling.

This is Steinhäuser's first kachelofen, finished in 2007 and currently acting as a display model.

Rectangular in shape, with a small black iron door at the bottom, it's built of six levels of clay-brick tiles, or kachels. These hollow kachels are all moulded, cut and fired (one at a time) in one of Steinhäuser's three kilns. They are then coated in a glaze and later mortared together with a clay mix.

"I like throwing mugs and whatnot on the

(potter's) wheel," says Steinhäuser, who was born in Canada but raised in Nuremberg, Germany. "But my heart is in these ovens. I grew up with one in my own family house and I've wanted to build them for a long, long time."

According to Steinhäuser, with just four to five logs, the small, high-temperature kachelofen fires can radiate heat for eight to 24 hours, surpassing modern gas and oil heating systems in emission tests.

"It's a hot, hot fire with lots of oxygen that burns quickly at first; there's complete combustion so no soot builds up."

Compared to fireplaces and old cook stoves, which require stoking, kachelöfens are dust-free and produce non-toxic gases, making them ideal for allergy sufferers.

A wooden bench can be built in to surround the kachelofen (on average measuring 100 centimetres by 60 centimetres) and despite the oven's high temperature, its exterior is never too hot to touch.

Kachelöfens are also available in gas or electric as well as the traditional wood models.

"There are so many good things about them," says Steinhäuser.

"In Germany and Austria they build thou-

sands of these ovens per year. I was shocked when I first came here and nobody had any knowledge of them."

Antique kachelöfens can be found in the gold-encrusted rooms of the palace of Catherine the Great in Pushkin, Russia. Frederick the Great of Prussia staged a competition in 1763 to award the builder of a kachelofen that burned the least amount of wood. Even American author Mark Twain openly expressed his adoration of the "German stove," in his 1923 book *Europe and Elsewhere*, calling it "most convenient and economical" compared to

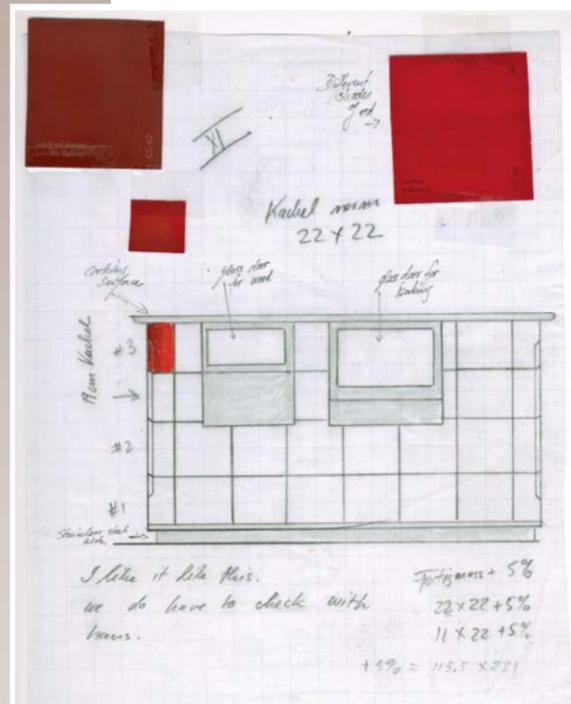
the "terror" of the American wood stove.

According to Steinhäuser, this specific oven seems not to have been as popular in France and Britain, and that may be why it never made its way across the Atlantic.

"It's just so strange," she says. "There's a ton of wood here, it's a cold country . . . they'd be perfect."

When she moved to Canada in 1988 — "looking for adventure" — Steinhäuser focused on her trade as a potter.

"At first, I didn't speak English very well, and I think I thought people would never take me seriously anyway if I told them ▶



ADDED BEAUTY

Dynamic red tiles accent this kachelofen, called a tischerd, which is not only a source of heat, it is also designed to be a cook stove.

Photography • Dean Palmer

► I can build you a masonry heater.”

She'd been working seriously with clay since she was 18, training at the State School for Art and Design in Nuremberg and then attending a three-year apprenticeship program at the State School for Ceramics in Landshut, Germany, before receiving her graduate journeyman potter designation.

And while they'd been trained how to make the individual kachels as students, Steinhäuser had never actually put a standing kachelofen together.

In 2005, she hopped on a plane to Austria. There she worked alongside master oven builder, Mario Zauner, to learn how to take a pile of tiles and fashion them into a functioning, beautiful structure all by hand.

The job requires a certified oven builder because the flue structure, made of special refractory brick, is custom-built for each oven.

Not only is there no market in Canada for these ovens, she says, but there are also no



BIT OF WHIMSY

Fairy-tale-like sketches by Guelph artist Ryan Price highlight this stove, currently on display at the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre in Guelph.

Photography • Dean Palmer

oven builders here, adding to the difficulties.

Nonetheless, when she returned to Guelph, she started the pearly oven, her first: “I wanted to put it in my house actually, but it's just too small for any of the rooms.” It is now stationed in her showroom.

“What a disaster,” she groans, reminiscing at her big table of a desk, covered in her artistic pencil sketches and graph paper full of measurements for her oven designs.

The clay was different than that used in Germany, and more than half the kachels cracked when she applied the glaze and she didn't have the money at the time to start over.

She would still show customers the remaining pieces and try to stand them up to demonstrate what a kachelofen would

look like, but no one seemed interested.

Those first pieces sat around for nearly two years before Steinhäuser decided enough was enough and had a stone mason friend help her put the tiles all together.

“I invested so much time and money into that one, I was just so happy I had tears in my eyes when I finally finished it,” she says.

Energized, she sank her hands into the clay of her second oven, a majestic, round forest-green one to take to the faculty exhibition at the Haliburton School of the Arts, where she teaches contemporary design and traditional technique.

“I'm like the little engine that goes,” she says, laughing. “Instead of bringing a standard clay vase, I was going to bring an oven.” And she did.

That same green oven, with tree designs and Steinhäuser's own thoughts handwritten onto some of its tiles, went on to be featured in the 2011 annual, outdoor ceramic exhibition called 1001 Pots in Val-David, Que.

Finally, after these two ovens, her first customer was on the horizon.

Guelph city councillor Ian Findlay says he was looking for something beautiful but also efficient and environmentally friendly in 2008 to heat his historic house.

“There was a double-sided fireplace, but I was losing a lot of heat out the chimney,” he says. “I'd known Jessica for a number of years and this type of stove seemed to really suit our needs.”

Findlay says it has also cut their heating bill by two-thirds.

“They are expensive, which is maybe why they haven't been more popular,” he says. “But you have to also recognize that this is handcrafted art as well as an oven, and we appreciate that.”

The ovens, depending on size and other factors, can range from \$16,000 to \$30,000, says Steinhäuser.

“It is a big investment,” she says, “and not only for the customer but (for) me and my oven builder as well.”

The whole construction process takes over two months, but they'll last a lifetime, says Steinhäuser.

Still, she almost gave up on her dream.

“I was pretty broke and it didn't seem to be going anywhere,” says Steinhäuser. “It was heartbreaking, but I figured there comes a time when you have to know to let go. . . . I decided I was finished with them.”

Then one morning she received an email from Marko Duic, a Toronto doctor looking to include a few kachelöfens in his new house in the Casa Loma district to remind him of his native Croatia.

“I thought he was crazy,” she says. “No way was he being serious.”

Turned out he was and before she knew it she was collaborating with Duic's architect to include a red cooking kachelofen (called a tischerd) in the kitchen and an intense sapphire blue one, with Duic's favourite Croatian poem inscribed on the crown, ►



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“My most favourite part is seeing it all come together, to finally set up all those tiles that had just been lying flat and step back and look at the finished product.” Jessica Steinhäuser

► in his study.

Her old oven-builder friend from Austria, Zauner, journeyed to Toronto to build the flues and help install the ovens.

“My most favourite part is seeing it all come together,” says Steinhäuser, “to finally set up all those tiles that had just been lying flat and step back and look at the finished product. Sometimes I can’t actually believe I did it.”

The same red tischerd they forged in 2010 for Duic won Steinhäuser first place in the North American Masonry Heaters Association’s 2011 contest in the bake-oven category.

And just this fall, she finished installing her sixth kachelofen at the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre in Guelph, featured until Nov. 20 in the exhibit *Oven of Fire and Myth*. It is then being purchased by local artist Nadia Slawinski.

This oval oven, highlighted by its charcoal-coloured grout, is designed to look like a canvas. Guelph artist Ryan Price, illustrator of the 2006 edition of *The Raven* by Edgar Allan Poe, has drawn on a fairytale-like sketch of a girl and a bird with a Pied Piper-like village in the background.

“I feel pretty good about the possibilities now,” says Steinhäuser, who’s currently working on another bright red oven for a client in Creemore, just west of Barrie. “I’m receiving emails every few weeks or so inquiring about them. . . . I had one even from England the other day.”

On the web: www.stonehousepottery.com