

From Clay to Kiln

An Introduction to the Traditional Pottery of the Moroccan Medinas

Atlas Editorial

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This handbook is part of the Atlas Field Editions series. Each volume gathers practical knowledge about a living Moroccan tradition — its history, its tools and its craft — in a form meant to be read once and kept for reference.

CHAPTER 1

A Craft Older Than Memory

Long before Morocco had the borders it has today, its river valleys were producing pottery. Neolithic shards recovered from sites across the north predate any medina by thousands of years, and the practical logic of the craft — river clay, wood fire, water as the shaping medium — has not fundamentally changed since. What the cities added was refinement: glazes, pigments, tile geometry, and workshops organised around family lines that still carry the trade.

Three cities anchor the modern tradition. Fez is the intellectual capital: home of the famous cobalt blues, of the zellige tile workshops that cut glazed slabs into mosaic geometry, and of a ceramic heritage tied to the city's ninth-century founding. Safi, on the Atlantic coast, became in the twentieth century the liveliest pottery town in the kingdom — a whole hill of the medina, Colline des Potiers, is given over to wheel workshops and giant kilns, and its potters are virtuosos of large, thin-walled, richly painted vessels.

Tamegroute, a small oasis town in the Draa Valley near the desert, guards the most distinctive glaze in the country: a deep olive-green, sometimes shot with gold and black, made from local copper and manganese ores by a recipe the glaze-masters keep in the family. Tamegroute pottery is deliberately irregular — heavy, organic, drip-marked — and unmistakable at a glance among all the ceramics of North Africa.

Between these poles lie dozens of local schools: the unglazed red water coolers of the south, the painted earthenware of Salé, the robust storage jars of the Rif villages. This handbook uses the three great centres as its map, because between them they contain nearly every technique a beginner will want to understand: shaping, decorating, glazing and firing.

CHAPTER 2

Clays and Their Preparation

Moroccan potters speak of clay the way cooks speak of flour: by behaviour, not by chemistry. The workhorses are the river clays of the Oum Er-Rbia and the Draa, and the grey-black earthenware bodies of the north; Safi imports and blends clays for its fine white-bodied ware, while Tamegroute digs a local ochre body that turns brick-red in the fire. The colour you see in a finished pot is the colour of its ground — which is why the same glaze looks different in each city.

Preparation is labour before it is art. Dug clay is dried, crushed, sieved to remove stones and roots, then kneaded with water in the ancient practice called wedging: the potter folds and pushes the mass repeatedly, driving out air pockets that would otherwise explode in the kiln. A well-wedged clay is described by its feel — smooth as dough, cool, holding any shape the hands leave on it.

The traditional workshop stores its clay in a shaded pit, covered with wet cloth, sometimes resting for weeks. Ageing improves plasticity as organic matter breaks down; potters speak of clay being ready the way bakers speak of risen dough. For a beginner, the lesson is patience: most early failures — cracking, warping, exploding — trace back to rushed preparation rather than to shaping or firing.

Additives tune the body. Fine sand or grog (crushed fired clay) is kneaded in for large vessels, opening the body so it dries evenly; a little iron oxide warms the colour; salt in the water is a desert trick to stiffen a soft mix. Every workshop keeps its ratios by hand and memory rather than by scale — a reminder that this is a craft of repetition, where the hands learn what the lab cannot teach.

CHAPTER 3

Shaping: Wheel and Hand

The kick wheel of the Moroccan workshop has not changed in centuries: a heavy stone disc on a low axle, spun by the potter's foot while the hands work at knee height. Watching a Safi master open a forty-centimetre tagine base in thirty seconds is the fastest lesson in why this technology survived. The wheel gives cylinders, bowls, plates and the iconic conical tagine lids; it is taught first and mastered never.

Hand-building shares the workshop with the wheel. Coiling — stacking ropes of clay and smoothing them upward — builds the great storage jars and water coolers whose walls the wheel could never raise in one pass. Pinching and slab work handle the smaller pieces. In village production, hand-building remains the norm, and the fingerprints pressed into a jar's shoulder are literally the maker's signature.

Handles, spouts and lids are added at the leather-hard stage, when the clay is firm but still damp enough to accept joins. The tagine pot teaches the principle: base and cone are thrown separately, joined with slip (liquid clay) and scored surfaces, then shaped as one. A joint made cleanly now will survive the kiln for decades; a joint made carelessly announces itself as a crack within the year.

Drying is the quiet stage where beginners lose pieces. Workshops dry slowly, in shade, away from draughts, turning pieces regularly so no face dries ahead of another. Rushed drying pulls handles off and splits rims. The rule the masters repeat: the clay decides the calendar, not the calendar the clay.

CHAPTER 4

Decoration and Glazes

Moroccan decoration begins before glaze, on the dry unglazed surface. Fez potters draw with a squirrel-hair brush in cobalt oxide — the famous blue — painting undulating arabesques, calligraphy and the interlaced geometries that echo the city's tilework. The raw decoration looks grey and unimpressive; the kiln's transformation from grey oxide to singing blue is the city's oldest magic trick, still performed daily.

Safi's painting is polychrome and freer: browns, greens, yellows and blues over a white slip, often with figurative touches — birds, fish, the eyes of hamsa — on dishes and vases intended for daily use. The style is confident and improvised; two supposedly identical tagines from the same workshop will differ like two songs from the same singer.

Glazes are glass, suspended in water. The traditional base is lead-silica in older workshops and healthier borax recipes in newer ones; copper oxide turns Tamegroute's signature green, cobalt turns blue, iron turns amber and honey. The glaze is applied by dipping, pouring or brushing onto the fired or unfired body, and in the kiln it melts into a glassy skin that seals the porous clay beneath — the difference between a flowerpot and a bowl you can serve from.

Zellige, the mosaic tilework, extends decoration into architecture: large glazed slabs are fired, then hand-cut with a hammer into precise polygons and assembled face-down into geometric fields. It is the most demanding branch of the craft — the cutters, maallems of the chisel, apprentice for years — and it explains why Fez treats its potters and its tile-cutters as cousins in a single family of skills.

CHAPTER 5

Firing: The Traditional Kilns

The wood-fired kiln is the heart of the Colline des Potiers in Safi — beehive structures of brick and mud, some older than the workshops around them, stacked firing chambers above a firebox that burns olive wood and scrub. A big kiln fires thousands of pieces at once, and the neighbourhood schedules its life around the smoke: loading day, firing day, and the two days of patient cooling before the doors are broken open.

Temperature is read without instruments, by eye and by experience. The fireboxes glow from orange toward white; senior potters read the colour of the flame and the behaviour of the glaze through the spy-hole the way sailors read the sea. Earthenware fires around 950–1100 degrees Celsius — hot enough to vitrify the glaze while keeping the body porous enough for the water coolers that make evaporation their refrigeration.

Firing is where the craft keeps its drama. Pieces touch and fuse; glaze drips and fixes; a hidden air pocket shatters one pot and leaves its twin perfect. Tamegroute's potters embrace the accident — their green glaze is intended to run, pool and flash in the flame, so that no two bowls ever match. Elsewhere the accident is fought, and lost gracefully; either way, the kiln has the final word.

Cooling is discipline, not waiting. A kiln opened early crackles as pieces split under thermal shock, undoing days of work in a minute. The masters let the fire die and the mass cool for a day or two, and the opening of the kiln — hands reaching into the warm dark, pulling out the glazed colour that the grey paintings promised — remains the ceremony that keeps apprentices in the trade.

CHAPTER 6

Starting Your Own Practice

Everything in this handbook can be attempted at a beginner's scale. Start with the clay: buy a low-fire earthenware body from a pottery supplier rather than digging your own — wild clay is a later adventure. Wedge it thoroughly, even if the bag says prepared; ten minutes of kneading teaches the hands more than a week of reading. Keep a bowl of slip, an old towel, and simple wooden tools: a rib, a needle, a loop trimmer.

Learn three forms before learning decoration: a pinch bowl, a coil cup and a wheel cylinder if you have access to a wheel. Let them dry slowly under plastic, trim at leather-hard, and accept the losses — every potter's first shelf is a museum of cracks. Fire the survivors at earthenware temperature, and only then begin decorating: commercial low-fire glazes reproduce the Fez cobalt and the Tamegroute green honestly enough for a first collection.

Study the sources, because the tradition rewards attention. Handle real zellige in Fez; watch the wheel masters of Safi, who will fill a shelf before your coffee cools; touch the dripping green bowls of Tamegroute and notice how the glaze thickens at the foot. Moroccan craft is generous with observation — workshops are open, masters proud — and a morning of watching replaces a month of guessing.

Finally, keep the ceremony of the craft: work at the same hour, clean the tools, wedge tomorrow's clay before stopping. Pottery rewards rhythm the way tea rewards patience and the desert rewards wakefulness. From clay to kiln is a short distance and a long apprenticeship — which is precisely what makes it worth beginning.

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