

Swedish Ceramics - from the Earth to the Table

When [Skåne, Sweden](#) started mining coal in the 16th century they also had a serendipitous discovery of finding excellent quality clay necessary for the production of ceramics. By 1799 the first pottery factory opened, and today the [Ceramic District](#) located in the northwestern part of Skåne, preserves this most fascinating art.



There is something intrinsic about ceramics and the circle that connects the earth with the artist to the recipient. It is a tactile art, where the artist needs to manipulate the clay extracted from the earth and from the riverbeds, and working by hand as well as using a potter's wheel form the raw material into objects. The physicality of the art is dynamic, it requires alternating strength and gentleness throughout the creation process. It is like Mother Earth giving birth, as it requires intense labor to extract the clay from the earth, cut a section of the clay, throw the clay with some force onto a spinning wheel, and then like a midwife assisting a mother, the artist must slowly and gently form the clay with their hands into the desired shape. Once the object has been created, it is cut from the wheel, set to dry on a shelf, and then fired and glazed in a kiln.

We visited Sweden in May 2008, and wanted to learn more about their famous ceramics, and began our ceramics education on what is called the **Ceramic Trail**, which has an impressive concentration of 80 ceramic artists. Our first visit was to Vallåkra in the northwestern part of Skåne, to the salt glazed stoneware factory, [Wallåkra Stenkärlsfabrik](#) founded by J.C. Billow and C.A. af Ekström in 1864. The location is deceiving; we parked our car in an ordinary parking lot, however, as we walked along a path to the ceramics factory, the natural beauty of the area came into view. A sign noted that the area is the Borgen nature reserve and in 1970 dinosaur tracks were found in this area. In our minds' eye we conjured up images of these almost fairytale beasts walking the grounds where dappled light filtered through the trees and wild flowers caressed the edge of the stream.



Factory and Water Wheel

Meeting with **Åsa Ormell**, the artist and owner of Wallåkra Stenkärlsfabrik, we learned that the Skåne area is the only place in Sweden where there is coal and clay. During the early days of coal mining they discovered a layer of coal alternating with a layer of clay, and while the coal that they found was not as good of a quality as English coal, the clay was very high quality. From this discovery, the first factory was founded in 1799 in Helsingborg to manufacture ceramics using the coal to fire the kilns.



Åsa Ormell



Today, using an abundance of clay from the garden of the property, Åsa mixes the clay with water using a water wheel, and uses 10-15 tons of clay each year creating traditional salt-glazed stoneware.

She is passionate about her art, as well as preserving the ceramic history and Sweden's cultural heritage. This is a labor of love, as the creation of salt-glazed stoneware uses coal fired brick kilns that must be stoked every 30 minutes. The clay is fired at 1300° C (2372° F), rock salt is thrown into the fireplace which works its way into the vapor in the kiln and as the rock salt and the silica in the clay mix together, forms a glazes on the pots and turns them a deep shade of brown.



During the firing process, for three days and nights, Åsa sits beside the kiln in a comfortable chair with an egg timer and continually stokes the coal fires. Once the firing is complete, the ceramics remain in the kiln

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for 2 weeks during the cooling down process to bring the kiln under 100° C (212° F). Standing inside the kiln we were impressed with its beehive shape where the walls were lined with pieces waiting for firing, which takes place four times per year.

It is a natural art, where not only the shape of each object slightly differs as they are made by hand, but also the glaze of each pot is slightly different depending on where it was placed in the kiln.



Salt Glazed Pots

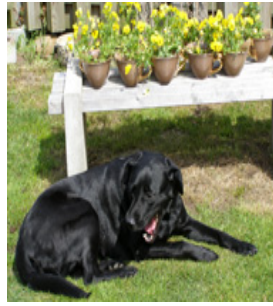


Touring the shop we admired the wood shelves laden with an inviting assortment of pots, bowls, dishes, crocks, and vases, each bearing the distinct Wallåkra Stenkärilsfabrik mark in the traditional salt-glazed burnished brown color. For visitors feeling adventuresome, Wallåkra Stenkärilsfabrik offers ceramic classes, and also has clay for sale in the shop.

Wallåkra Stenkärilsfabrik is open Monday - Friday from 12:00 pm - 4:00 pm, and on Sunday from 12:00 pm - 4:00 pm. There is also a very nice restaurant located over the stream where fortunate diners may see a salmon passing by beneath the acrylic floor.

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Our next visit was to the atelier of the artist, [Kerstin Tillberg](#), who takes a contemporary approach to her colorful and fanciful stoneware. As we entered through the garden gate we were welcomed by Hedwig, Kerstin's sweet tempered black Labrador, with Kerstin in tow behind her.

We met with Kerstin in her red trimmed greenhouse shop where her whimsical stoneware designs lined the shelves adding charm and color. Her designs feature wonderful details including handmade roses, gold handles on oversize coffee cups, shells that she picks up from the beach to use in her molds for her seashell vases, angels with gold striped wings enchant, and cheerfully painted eggcups.



Kerstin Tillberg Designs

Touring her atelier, we learned that she uses three different kilns, and her approach to ceramics is to paint the raw clay then fire them at 960° C (1760° F), take them out and fire them again. It was interesting to learn that when she is using gold or platinum, firing must take place at a lower temperature of 780° C (1436° F).



Kerstin Tillberg Designs



Unlike Åsa OrmellWallåkra Stenkärlsfabrik, who uses clay from Vallåkra, Kerstin uses clay from Germany. She is another passionate artist, who celebrates her 25th anniversary of making ceramics in 2008. Even after all these years of designing, she said that when a special piece is perfect, regardless of the effort and time that went into its creation, it still "makes me feel good."

The atelier of Kerstin Tillberg is open Fridays from 4:00 pm - 6:00 pm, and on Saturday and Sunday from 11:00 am - 4:00 pm.



Edward with Kerstin Tillberg in her Shop

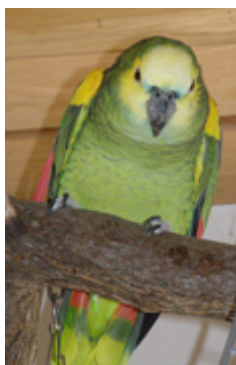
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Our last stop on the Ceramic Trail was to visit the artist **Lisa Wohlfahrt** whose foray into the ceramics business accidentally began when she took an evening class fifteen years ago. From the very beginning she was hooked, and opened [Mölle krukmakeri](#) in 1997, and was joined in 2003 by the artist Pytton, where their focus is on making stoneware and earthenware.



Meeting with Lisa and Pytton, we learned how the making of stoneware differs from earthenware. Making stoneware requires firing at 1300° C (2372° F), is extremely durable, and non-porous even when unglazed; earthenware, which they use to create garden pots, is fired at 900° C (1652° F) and is porous unless glazed.



Albert, a parrot, is the resident mascot who keeps a keen eye on the artistic process, and even Lisa's 6-year old daughter, Mira, is involved in the making of ceramics, creating fanciful sculptures, and has her own shelf in the shop where she has her pieces for sale.

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Visiting the Ceramic District in Skåne was not only an interesting learning experience it also provided us with newfound respect and appreciation for the art.



Swedish Ceramic Artistry

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