

The Boston Globe

Arts

BOOKS | MOVIES | MUSIC | TELEVISION | THEATER/DANCE | VISUAL ARTS | SEASONAL GUIDE

Artisans on Asparagus Valley Pottery Trail fired up for the weekend

Now in its 19th year, the trail has eight stops in Western Massachusetts and will feature 27 potters, including guests.

By **Mark Shanahan** Globe Staff, Updated April 26, 2023, 4:01 p.m.



James Guggina loads wood into his kiln at his studio as he fires his work. Guggina is one of the potters who will be taking part in the Asparagus Valley Pottery Trail in Western Massachusetts this weekend. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

NORTHAMPTON — On a recent weekday morning, James Guggina was feeding wood into his backyard kiln and watching the pyrometer climb toward 2,500 degrees.

“This is my job. It’s also my absolute passion,” he said, pausing with an armful of scrap wood salvaged from a local casket company. “People complain about sitting in a cubicle all day. I feel so fortunate that I get to make things.”

What Guggina makes is functional pottery — mugs, plates, platters, ice cream bowls, garlic pots, butter dishes — and all of it will be for sale at this weekend’s Asparagus Valley Pottery Trail, an annual, two-day event when clay workers in Western Massachusetts open their studio doors to the public.



James Guggina’s pottery is seen inside his studio. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Now in its 19th year, the trail has eight stops, including three pottery studios in Shelburne Falls, three in Northampton, one in Greenfield, and one in Hadley. Each studio will also feature the work of guest potters from around New England and beyond, bringing the total number of participating artisans to 27.

“There are potters everywhere,” said Guggina. “But there are definitely a lot of potters out here.”

Indeed, the Asparagus Valley Pottery Trail — the name is a nod to the area’s rich agricultural history, when “Hadley grass” was so bountiful Hampshire County was considered the asparagus capital of the world — is one of two pottery trails in Western Mass. The other, the Hilltown 6 Pottery Tour, takes place in July.



Donna McGee, one of the founders of the Asparagus Valley Pottery Trail, works on a piece inside her studio. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Donna McGee, one of the founders of the Asparagus Trail, isn’t sure why so many ceramic artists have settled in and around the Pioneer Valley. Maybe it’s the natural beauty of the place or the cost of living, which is considerably lower than Boston or New York. Or, she said, it could be something else: “I’ve heard there are certain meridians on the earth that attract certain things, and a minor one goes through Northampton.”

McGee apprenticed with a potter in Boston before opening her studio in Hadley 40-plus years ago. She lives in nearby Hatfield and rides her bike to work every morning. (There’s a used bookstore on the first floor and a corral of ducks outside.) Known for her earthenware decorated with whimsical drawings, McGee said the trail has been great for potters and patrons alike.

“I’m amazed at the number of people who visit and want to go into my studio,” she said. “That’s what this is all about. People want to see where the creativity happens.”



Donna McGee's work is seen inside of her studio. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

And in a digital age, McGee said, customers increasingly appreciate items that are handmade.

“The buy-local food movement isn’t just about the food, it’s about the plate the food is on, too,” she said.

When the pandemic struck in 2020, the pottery trail was forced to go online, which turned out to be a boon for potters, many of whom sold only at craft fairs and had no Internet presence at all. All of a sudden, people in California were placing orders for planters and dinnerware. (The Asparagus Trail’s online sale begins Friday at noon, with prices set by the potters.)

“People really showed up for us,” said potter Tiffany Hilton, whose studio is in the Arts & Industry Building in Florence. “It was very early on in the pandemic, and the world wasn’t tired yet of everything being virtual.”



Tools hang on a shelf inside Donna McGee's studio. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Over the past few years, as the world opened up, some of those new customers appeared in person on the weekend of the pottery trail, traveling from New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut to check out the studios.

“It’s not like Filene’s Basement, but it’s busy,” said Molly Cantor, who has a home studio and storefront in Shelburne Falls.

Cantor, whose teapots, ramen bowls, and mugs typically feature distinctive block-print designs, said the community of potters is more collegial than competitive.

“But instead of borrowing a cup of sugar, we might say, ‘Hey, does anybody have some dolomite I can borrow?’” she said, referring to a mineral used in many glazes.

Hilton agrees.

“You can stereotype potters as generous, open, caring people who just want to feed you and hang out with you,” she said. “We get together and share food and tell each other all our secrets, like, ‘Here’s my glaze recipe.’”



Colorants or ingredients for slips and glazes are seen on the shelves inside Donna McGee's studio. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Guggina moved to Northampton two decades ago from Boston, where he attended MassArt and worked for the acclaimed Fort Point potter Gabrielle Schaffner. These days, Guggina has three kilns — wood, gas, and electric — and he works, more or less, constantly.

He didn't know anyone in the area initially, but that changed after he was invited to join the pottery trail. "It's great to have other people to commiserate with nearby," Guggina said. And this weekend, there will be throngs of folks visiting his studio.

"Pottery aficionados come, of course, and people from Boston and New York, but my neighbors also wander in to see what's going on and say hello," he said. "I'm here by myself working all the time, so it's nice to have people come see the setting where the pottery is made."

The Asparagus Valley Pottery Trail takes place Saturday and Sunday, with all studios open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. The online sale begins at noon Friday at asparagusvalleypotterytrail.com, and prices for select pieces, as well as a map with contact information, can be found there.

Mark Shanahan can be reached at mark.shanahan@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter @MarkAShanahan.