

# Tater Knob Pottery & Farm: Success is a Party

*"There are thousands of potters making good pieces. We needed to find a way to sell our things that worked for us."*

by Jim Weaver

There's something special about being at an artist's home and studio, sharing a cup of tea and a cookie, and looking directly into the face of the person who has spent a lifetime perfecting the artistic skills represented in a work. "The human contact makes all the difference," says Sarah Lee Culbreth, who, with her husband, Jeff Enge, own and operate Tater Knob Pottery near Berea, Ky. "People who visit our studio and buy our work remember us. We greet everyone personally, tell them about our work and ourselves, answer their questions, and make them feel like guests in our home. We've always tried to provide more than a piece of art."

In fact, the couple has learned how to make a run-of-the-mill studio show and sale into a unique and memorable marketing event.

Both potters are graduates of the Berea College crafts program and have worked in clay for more than a quarter century. In the beginning of their careers, they sold their work from the College's craft shop and a local gallery, but they wanted a place of their own. Now, 23 years later, Tater Knob Pottery and Farm is a regular stop for many people interested in quality ceramics.

Located 10 miles out of town, down a bumpy, gravel road, it's the sort of place you're only likely to visit if you already know something about it. "When we moved here we knew we would lose sales," says Culbreth. "Business dropped about 50 percent in the first year, but we built it back and have kept it growing ever since."

## A UNIQUE WAY OF MARKETING YOUR BUSINESS

In 1980, an annual Christmas Holiday Show and Sale was a marketing solution to their sagging sales. "It began in order to let people



A lantern by Jeff Enge.

in the Berea community know that we existed," says Enge. "We distributed hand-printed flyers and stuffed people's mail boxes."

At first, the show was just a six-hour event, but it continued to grow until December 2002 when it encompassed three days.

Nearly 300 people accepted their invitations. "Dozens of people were lined up at the door by noon," says Enge. Customers made purchases totaling over \$14,000 and many people tell the potters that they begin their holiday shopping every year at Tater Knob.

The Kentucky potters have a national (plus 34 foreign countries) mailing list of 7,000 names that they have compiled over the years. They mail to the entire list every two years and holiday show invitations are sent annually to everyone within 600 miles of Berea. "Some people have made a trip to Tater Knob Pottery a family holiday tradition and return every year," says Culbreth.

The visitors come not only for the crafts, but also for the hospitality. One couple, Jim and Charlotte Bean of Columbus, Ohio, have been coming for the past 20 years.

## FOOD, ENTERTAINMENT MAKE IT MEMORABLE

To make the event more memorable, food is a big part of the festivities. Culbreth prepares homemade soups and venison chili that are very welcome since it's often cold in the Kentucky hills in December. There are also homemade breads, cakes, cookies, cheese and fruit, plus coffee, hot cider, hot chocolate and a variety of teas.

Culbreth gets help from neighbors and friends, and the couple's 11-year-old son, David. The studio and sales room are decorated for the season and a wood fire burns in the cast iron stove.

Many times there's musical entertainment and guest artists are invited to give demonstrations and show their wares. Larry Pierson, a broom maker from Virginia, was at the most recent show. "He grows his own broom



Sarah Culbreth and Jeff Enge, of Tater Knob Pottery.

James Weaver is free-lance writer who lives in Pennsylvania.



corn,” says Culbreth, “and makes brooms that sweep like a feather.”

Other guest artists, Erin and James Passmore from rural Madison County, Ky., offered soap made from their goat’s milk, honey from their hives, and an assortment of their hand-sewn items. Jazz guitarist Clive Pohl and his five-piece group from Lexington, Ky., have performed original works by Pohl and his wife, Lissa, at past events.

Culbreth and Enge often provide throwing demonstrations and give their guests (particularly children) a chance to try it themselves. “[It’s] a far cry from Wal-Mart,” Culbreth says. “Our approach to business has always been to provide more than just our pottery.”

#### SERVICE AND HOSPITALITY LEAD TO SALES

Except for placing a few pieces of their work at the Berea College craft shop and at some of the Kentucky state parks, Enge says that they sell everything direct. “We don’t wholesale, but depend on our mailing list, our Web site, and visitors to our studio.”

Culbreth believes service and hospitality have been the biggest part of their success. “There are thousands of potters making good pieces,” she says. “We needed to find a way to sell our things that worked for us.”

Although many craft artists already have annual holiday shows and sales, Tater Knob’s success at marketing themselves through their shows is a mix of elements — a large mailing list of past customers and people who have expressed interest in their work, a festive atmosphere, and lots of “down-home” hospitality.

Enge looks forward to the day when he and Culbreth can turn over some of the responsibilities for the pottery’s operation to others. “We understand we can’t continue indefinitely, that we’ll need help,” he says.

#### For more information

**Tater Knob Pottery and Farm**

(859) 986-2167

[www.taterknob.com](http://www.taterknob.com)



*The exterior of Tater Knob Pottery.*

“Eventually, we hope to hire a couple of production potters to handle much of the heavy work. We also hope to begin a training center here where people can learn to work in clay.”

The next project, however, is to cash in on some of their marketing success and start construction of a new, larger sales room and a major rehabilitation of their studio facilities planned for 2003-04. **TCR**



*A pitcher and beverage glass set by Sarah Culbreth and Jeff Enge.*