

When Cookery Meets Crockery: A Chef and Potter Collaborate

The creative process can be exciting to watch, percolating as it tends to do; sometimes slowly and arduously and sometimes in a burst and fury of productivity. Chef Tyler Hansen of The [Oystercatcher Restaurant](#) and Potter Robbie Lobell of [Cook on Clay](#) follow their own creative processes on Whidbey Island in Coupeville, Washington. They are two artists who find work and inspiration, family and a high quality of life on this beautiful 55-mile long island less than two hours from Seattle. What happens when cookery meets crockery?

A visit to [Whidbey Island](#) offers the chance to experience the luxury of beautiful coastline, farmlands, rural roads, and a number of small towns, each with their own distinctive personalities. On a recent trip to the Island, I enjoyed a 5-course dinner at the Oystercatcher. During this truly exceptional meal, my ears perked at hearing Chef Tyler say he and Robbie had collaborated on the dinnerware and bakeware he uses at his restaurant. It turns out that I had the good fortune to sit next to Lobell at the dinner. Each expressed respect for one another and their work. I knew I had to learn more about their collaboration.

Whidbey Island

The Oystercatcher is one of the most exciting fine dining restaurants on Whidbey Island. This is saying a lot because there are a lot of exciting restaurants on the Island. More than their rightful share, some might say, given the size and population of the island.

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The abundance of outstanding places to eat (as well as places to stay) on the island stems from the fact that the island is full of small, family-owned farms. These farms have taken the cue to produce quality and mostly organic fruits, vegetables, and grains, artisan cheese, and other foods and beverages. Their goods are sold at farmer’s markets and to restaurants near and far. It’s also not unusual for chefs to maintain their own gardens. Local farms raise beef, pork, fowl and lamb. Some of the best Northwest seafood and shellfish is caught and harvested here. Seafood is coveted locally and regionally, and some of it is even shipped around the world.

It’s in the water, it’s in the soil, and in the maritime air; food just tastes better here. And chefs, farmers, artists, and others who live here and visit know it.

The Oystercatcher and Cook on Clay

Hansen and his wife Sara have owned the 36-seat Oystercatcher since December, 2013 and have won accolades ever since. When he starts with a dish, Hansen starts with an ingredient and asks himself, “What’s the best way for this to be prepared?” The Oystercatcher is the best of farm-to-

table dining.

Craftsmanship, Intention, Beauty, and Functionality

Out of the earth comes clay for pottery and out of Robbie Lobell's studio comes gorgeous artisan-made earthenware cookpots. Lobell lives and works on a beautiful parcel of wooded property just outside of Coupeville. A couple of days after the Oystercatcher dinner, I drove down the long driveway where Lobell lives and works with longtime life and business partner, artist, non-profit exec, and activist Potter Maryon Attwood.

Their home lies to the left of the driveway, the studio to the right. She admits it's a great situation. A cup of coffee in hand, she smiles. "I get up in my pajamas to start up the kiln before heading back inside to dress."

Lobell and Attwood started their company in 2010 and have remained steadfast in their dedication to quality, well-designed and hand-made pieces. Lobell also teaches and mentors other potters.

In the studio, signs read, "Yes! Please touch. Handle and touch these pots made to use in your kitchen and home." Sign or not, I couldn't have resisted. Handling the sinuous dishes and cookware was something I found myself doing throughout our meal at the Oystercatcher, even before learning that Lobell had specially created the dishes and pots used at the restaurant.

"In the cooking process, the clay participates in the way it holds and gives heat. Lamb shanks in a metal pot cook completely differently than in clay," Lobell says.

Her flameproof cookware moves easily from the refrigerator and to the oven, stovetop, or grill without cracking. Her pots are intentionally smooth on the bottom so that they don't scratch electric cooktops. (She actually likes the heat from electric cooktops, so was sure to provide cooks with that feature.)

"Design-wise, I'm interested in tactically soft and visually soft pieces. When I'm working on it, the clay is soft. I ask myself how I can make them feel visually soft."

There's craftsmanship, intention, beauty and functionality in each piece. I let my hand again run up the curvature of the handle.

"The applied handles imply volume and the promise of what's in the pot. The top of the handles and the rim are unglazed," Lobell says. "And I like the serendipity of what happens in the fire. I'm looking for a lot of variation in each pot."

The Collaboration

“I first saw some of Robbie’s pots at a friend’s house,” Hansen told me. “Sara and I loved the design and functionality. I contacted Robbie and started the conversation about making items for the restaurant. Keeping it local always plays a part for us. Of course we could buy from a restaurant supply store and get cheaper products, but they wouldn’t be original or to our specifications.”

In the end, Hansen says, “All of the pieces we have are specially designed for our restaurant. I was able to have so much input into the final product that they fit me as a chef. Many other chefs might like them, but they aren’t perfect for them. They are perfect for me.”

The two worked to fine-tune the designs until they got them right. They talked glazes and size, depth, and shape.

Lobell says, “We used soft applied handles on some of the pieces. I make a custom larger bowl with one handle and an extra-large one-handed skillet for him. One of the things I learned about Tyler is that he likes quite a bit of space with this food.”

Hansen says, “All of the dishes except the dinner and appetizer plates were made with a specific dish or course in mind. We started out with the items that we knew we would always need; the cups for the amuse bouche, the ‘spoons’ for the intermezzo, dishes for our chocolate truffles, and the pots for our cassoulet.”

When Cookery Meets Crockery: Favorite pieces

“I do like the cassoulet pots we did,” Lobell says. “I made some samples. They were too small, then too deep. Tyler didn’t want the diner to have to work too hard. We looked at handles, experimenting with making them higher, or lower.”

“The cassoulet pots are easily mine and Robbie’s favorite,” Hansen agrees. “Because she was familiar with our restaurant and my cooking style she knew that the dimensions we agreed upon originally were way too small. She called me up and I stopped by to discuss and we adjusted to the proper size.”

“The amuse cups are also wonderful,” says Hansen. “I originally had them made with a spiced duck soup in mind. We had just finished the winter season and I wanted something to contain that dish. We made them the perfect size and depth to hold and sip from and it turned out great. As the weather got warmer though I started to do amuses that weren’t liquid. Plating then in the cups was

ok, but it was hard for the guest to see the intricacies of the dish, and also a little difficult to eat. I went back to Robbie and we adjusted the design to be slightly wider and shallower. This allowed for us to use them for both liquid and solid applications.”

The Hansens and Lobell also considered weight and durability.

Lobell says, “I worked with Tyler on making pots for his culinary art. But I also worked with Sara on how the pieces would work for serving. Weight is very important to servers. The pieces couldn’t be too heavy.”

Hansen says, “Sara was quick to point out that having a two pound plate with a dinner size entree on it is torture for a server. We also had to think about the foot of the vessel and the height of the rim from the table. If the rim is too low to the table, you can’t get your fingers underneath to pick it up. This makes for an awkward situation for the server as they are fumbling with a plate at the table, and will ultimately detract from our guests’ experience.”

“What I said previously about the amuse cups is another reason I loved working with a local artist. I was able to take a design that was pretty good, ask her to make it a 1/4 inch wider and 1/2 inch shorter and it became perfect. You can’t call up a restaurant supply store and ask them to change the dimensions of their products.”

“Our collaboration made me think a little differently about what composes a set. Form and surface. Cooking pieces and serving pieces. Aspects of a ‘tabletop culture’ of cooking, entertaining, sharing a meal, breaking bread.”

Collaborations, by nature, should benefit all parties. This one did just that.

For More:

- Cook on Clay, Coupeville, Whidbey Island, Washington, <https://www.cookonclay.com/>
- Oystercatcher, Coupeville, Whidbey Island, Washington, <https://www.oystercatcherwhidbey.com/wp/>)
- Whidbey Island Tourism, <https://whidbeycamanoislands.com/>
- Whidbey Island Grown, <https://whidbeyislandgrown.com/>
- On our site: [A South Whidbey Island Culinary tour](#)
- On our site: [Luxury and Comfort at the Inn of Langley on Whidbey Island](#)

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