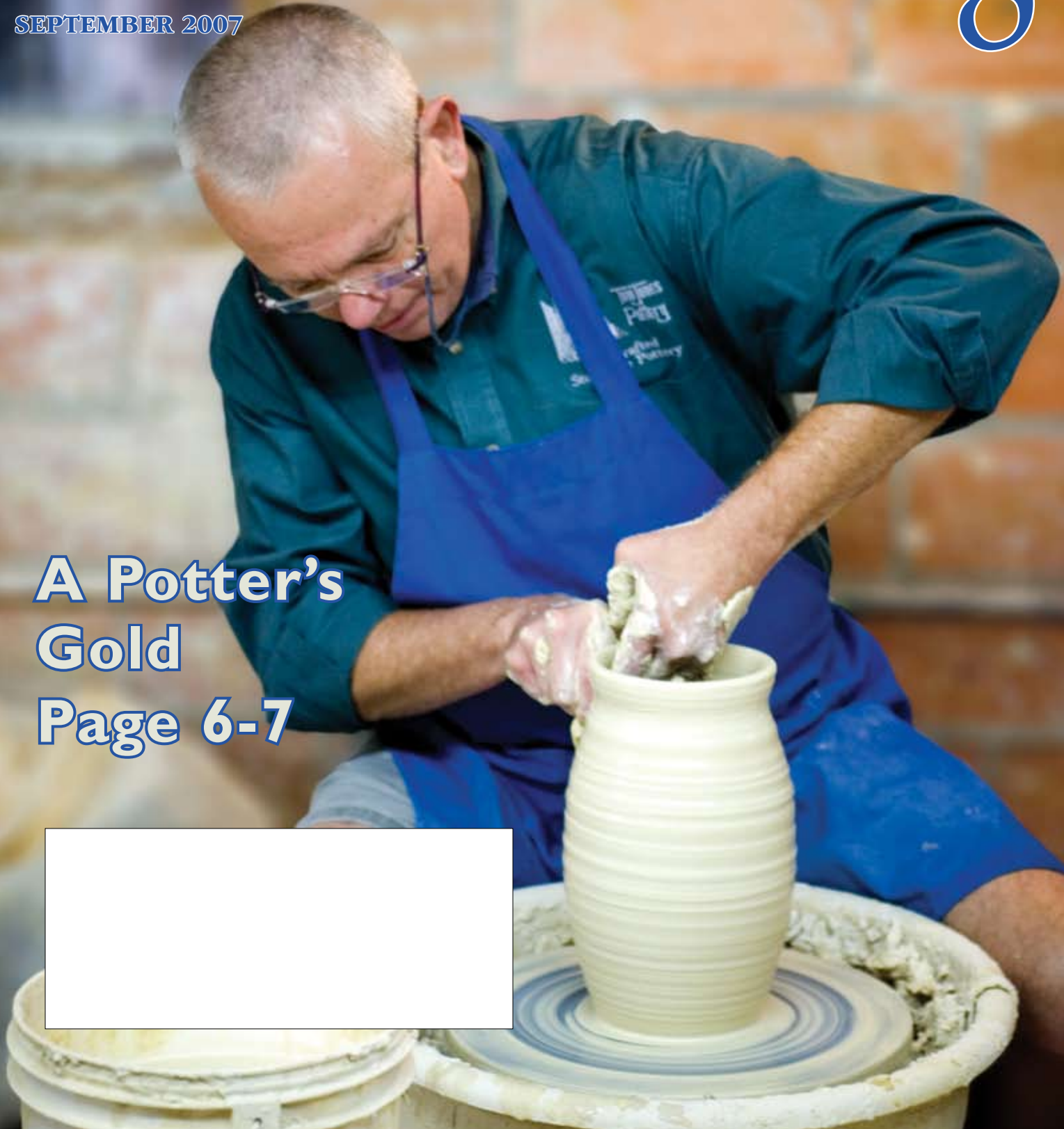




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**A Potter's
Gold
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The Touch of the Master's Hands

photo by Gabriel Tynes

“Clay City” lives up to its name at the hands of a local artist.

Story by Michelle Ricard

Tom Jones is not afraid to get his hands dirty. In fact, for him, it's all in a day's work. Jones is the artist behind Tom Jones Pottery, a quaint little shop nestled in a part of the Eastern Shore aptly known as “Clay City.”

Jones has been “throwing,” “slinging” and “firing” clay into beautiful creations for 40 years. His love for the craft started with a class in pottery at Marietta Johnson School of Organic Education in Fairhope when Jones was in ninth grade. He hasn't stopped potting since. “It's all I've ever done,” Jones says.

ART IS LIFE

When it came time to choose a career path, Jones turned his art into his livelihood. He's been

a part of pottery shops in various locations since 1974, including a spot in the French Quarter in New Orleans. Thirty-one years ago, Jones found a new home for his work right back on the Eastern Shore, near Fish River. It was a small shop originally built in the 1940s and operated by various owners. While Jones has done some remodeling since then, the original clay mixer and bee hive kiln where pots were traditionally fired in the 40's are still in place. Although neither is currently in daily use, both pieces are still in working condition.

THE TREASURE OF CLAY CITY

The part of town Jones and his shop both call home are ideal locations for a potter. The area on the banks of Fish River is a hot spot for the formation of rich, natural clay. The clay forms when Feldspar rocks decompose over time, and it's in abundance in the area. Jones has it delivered to his shop by the truckload, as much as 20 to 30 tons at a time. He mixes that supply with commercial clay from an outside distributor. However, Jones points out that the local clay is unique, and gives his work a certain sparkle and a distinctive surface texture.

THE STEPS TO COMPLETION

Although Jones makes it look effortless, the process of turning a lump of clay into a teapot, a set of dinner plates, or a coffee mug is nothing simple. “The whole thing takes about 3 weeks from start to finish,” says Jones. It’s a step by step method, each one requiring its own time and energy. First Jones mixes the local and commercial clay to make a workable piece. The artist and the clay then make their way to the wheel where it is “thrown” or formed into the shape of the piece Jones is designing. After a drying process, which can take anywhere from several hours to several days depending on weather conditions, Jones will add the desired color and detail to the work, and then sign and date each piece.

Then comes the fire. Using a gas-powered kiln, a special oven used in pottery, Jones places the pieces inside to be “fired” at temperatures of about 2400 degrees. They’ll stay in the kiln for around 10 to 12 hours, and are regularly monitored throughout the process.

Once Jones’ pieces are done, they’ll be sold to customers, some of whom have put in special requests for certain items. Jones says his work is both based on custom orders from his clients, and original designs that make their way to his shop’s shelves. Among the most popular items are his functional pieces, like chicken cookers and vegetable steamers.



photo by Gabriel Tynes

Also hugely popular is Jones’ Jack-O-Lantern series, which have been a staple in the shop since 1994. Every year beginning around July 1, he makes around 500 unique Jack-O-Lanterns, each of which is signed and numbered. They make their debut at Jones’ annual summer show. Some of the shop’s customers have been collecting the pieces for years, and are among the first to purchase each year’s designs.

THE CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS RIGHT

Among those loyal customers is 88-year-old Maxine Marshall, who started coming to Jones’ shop 15 years ago with her daughter Debbie Guerrero. Although it’s more than an hour drive from their hometown of Pensacola, Marshall and Guerrero regularly make the trip to buy from Jones, who, for them, has become a household name. “He does beautiful work,” says Marshall. “Honestly, he’s a master.” Guerrero helped Jones gain some international notoriety when she began shipping his original pieces to her daughter, who lives in Germany. “When you find a potter you’re this pleased with, it’s hard to go anywhere else,” says Guerrero.

Jones himself is a bit more modest about his own work. When asked how long it took him to become a master at his craft, he laughingly says, “I haven’t gotten there yet. I’m still working on it, but I’m getting there.”

Visitors can find Tom Jones Pottery on Clay City Road in the Fish River area. Or they can visit the artist online at www.tomjonespottery.net. ☞



photo by Gabriel Tynes

Photos: (Opposite Page) Jones uses his wheel to “throw” one of his popular Jack-O-Lanterns. (Top) Jones’ items are primarily for functional use, but some pieces, like this wall hanging, are purely decorative. (Left) Jones’ Jack-O-Lanterns, like the one seen here, are among the most popular items in the shop.