Playing with Fire: Yuri’s Kiln.

**Penny Smith describes a marathon kiln-building process**

With Yuri Wiedenhofer, it is sometimes difficult to know quite what his preferred medium is – clay or fire. Or whether he is more concerned about process than product – cause rather than effect. The reason for this kind of conjecture came about as a result of the final day of the *Woodfire Tasmania 2011* conference, which was held at Reedy Marsh, just outside Deloraine in northern Tasmania. It was here that I was to see this interesting artist in action for the first time and, as a faithful non-woodfirer, I was to have my close encounter of the wild kind.

Arriving at Neil Hoffmann’s home and studio at Reedy Marsh on that final Sunday, I was beginning to regret polishing my Blunnies before leaving home. The surrounding grounds of Hoffmann’s quietly idyllic home and studio was awash with soggy participants getting happily bogged down in nature at its most raw. Despite the early morning mist and drizzle, several groups of people were busy mining clay, building kilns and splitting wood. They were all responding to The Reedy Marsh Woodfire Challenge, with serious intent.

The ‘challenge’ was an idea conceived by conference organizer, Neil Hoffmann who, with his partner Anne, showed extraordinary generosity in opening up their home and studio to all involved. The idea of ‘the challenge’ Hoffmann says, had been one he had been mulling over for some time. ‘The challenge’ was issued to conference participants as ‘an extravaganza of clay, kiln building, woodfiring and kiln-centric food preparation’ whose aim was to get ‘the pot back into pottery and the food back into ceramics’. This promised an event more concerned with place and performance than it was about formality and tidily resolved conclusions.

The challenge then, was to build a kiln, mine and prepare a suitable clay body, artfully stack firing fuel, create a range of dinner ware, dry and fire it in readiness to serve up a meal to a panel of judges – in a single day from local resources. And to my mind, there was one clear winner. From the onset, Yuri’s kiln promised to be different. From its modest beginnings as a stone-lined hollow, to its lawn mower, grass catcher chimney cap, this kiln was unique.

Starting with a shallow pit that was lined with rocks, these foundations were then built upon further with layers of timber off-cuts. It was at this point of the proceedings that this particular kiln (there were four in all) caught my attention: wooden foundations? And the explanation? Quite simply, the kiln needed extra height – the wooden slats were to hand and timing (primarily the lack of it) was all. Dinner had to be served at 4.30 so there was no time to mess about.

In discussing the kiln with Yuri later, I realized his answer regarding the installation of these wooden foundations reflected not only his response to building a kiln within such strict time conditions, but also...
reflected the philosophy behind his own work. That of making do with whatever is available within one’s immediate vicinity. In the case of his own work, this reflects both responsible utilization (in his high temperature woodfired pottery) and celebration (as in his ‘fire sculptures’) of whatever is at hand. He describes his own work practices as a gamble, a game of chance and unpredictability, where he likes ‘to range wildly and won’t be tamed’. So it was with this kiln.

The spontaneity of this kiln became increasingly apparent as it evolved and this had a lot to do with the talented crew that made up the team. In addition to Yuri as kiln designer, the other core team members comprised of Toni Warburton, Ursula Burgoyne, Torbjørn Kvasbø, Peter Thompson, Rosemary O’Neill, Sue Acheson, Merrilyn Stock, Deb Kerr and Marilyn Raw.

Yuri did admit, however, to a little ‘cheating’ in his preparations, despite the design brief of all things being sourced locally. With the help of Sophie Pouly (who had been working with Daniel Lafferty and Yuri before the conference) Yuri had sewn up a series of long hessian tubes. These, along with some pre-made charcoal from his own kiln, accompanied him from his Tanja studio in New South Wales.

On the day, the hessian tubes were filled with a mixture of charcoal and the local Reedy Marsh clay, in a 50:50 mix. These clay/charcoal ‘sausages’ were then coated in clay slurry and coiled from the wooden base upwards. Between the layers of coils, the team placed large sticks to span across the kiln walls, providing structural integrity through cross bracing. Empty beer bottles (of which there was a constant supply
thanks to early drinkers) were also pushed through the structure – bottoms innermost. Interestingly, Yuri also wanted to use glass in the clay’s makeup, given that one of the judging criteria of ‘the challenge’ was to be the finished ware’s ‘ping’ factor (an indicator of how high the clay had been fired). Yuri’s intention was that the addition of crushed glass would provide an element of low-fired flux. This idea was greeted with considerable scepticism by the tableware makers as the intent was to impress the judges, not to kill them off.

The kiln moved quickly in its construction and, despite its organic nature, took on a kind of warped elegance akin to a traditional Staffordshire bottle kiln. Initially, the inserted bottles were a bit of puzzle. But as the kiln’s temperature intensified, water was sprayed inside each bottle that caused their bases to crack. These were knocked out with a metal stake and the neck of the bottles then tapped off from the outside – they then became side-stokers or ‘breathing holes’ for additional oxidation. For those of us unfamiliar with Yuri’s fire installations, this was a stroke of pure performance – but there were to be others.

Steel bars were inserted inside the kiln near the top which supported a shelf to take the ware. The ware itself was then packed snugly into the compartments of an empty cardboard six-pack carrying container and lowered carefully on to the shelf.

The crowning touch was the addition of an old metal lawn mower grass catcher (fossicked by Toni Warburton), which was placed halfway over the top of the kiln, acting as a partial damper and as a cooking receptacle for the intended meal. This had everyone guessing, including, I suspect, most of the team.

From the onset, this kiln reflected a fascinating blend of the preplanned and the spontaneous. While it was apparent that Yuri had a definite idea of how the kiln was to be built (what it was to be constructed from and how it should end up) it was clear that, as the team’s kiln builder, he was receptive and responsive to unexpected innovations that occurred along the way.
The grass catcher was an intriguing addition. This promised all kinds of cooking possibilities that had observers guessing as to what the finished menu might be. Baked bread? Or Beggar’s Chicken?4

Before these secrets were to be revealed, however, the grass catcher oven was used to ‘decorate’ the dinnerware in a manner of sheer genius. The hot pots were pulled from the kiln’s interior by Thompson with makeshift tongs, placed on Yuri’s waiting shovel and put in the red hot ‘oven’. Combustible material was then thrown on to the glowing ware creating an instant post-fired reduction finish. Once the oven had been cleaned out, the meal was cooked. This, initially, proved to be a bit of a let down. The oven, red hot at this stage, was used to toast the bread for the boiled eggs that had been cooked in a camp oven on top of the kiln.

The grass catcher ‘oven’ was suggestive of being used for so much more than just toasting bread or boiling water for the eggs. Yuri’s mob, however, was the only team to get the meal to the dinner table on time. And despite the meal’s simplicity, it did reflect a simple honesty that was not overwhelmed by the food itself or how it was plated. The subtle colour range from the post-fired reduction tableware to the ‘rakued’ toast and warm beiges of the eggs all complemented each other quite nicely.

Even after the meals had been served, the prizes awarded, the speeches completed and the applause had subsided – Yuri’s kiln continued to evolve. From the onset, this kiln was never intended for permanency. The nature of its charcoal and clay make-up meant that there was just enough of the latter to keep the former from collapsing the entire structure. The charcoal provided insulation and fuel. The clay provided just enough ‘glue’ to hold the form together long enough for its purpose – that of cooking the pots and the food. The wooden foundations provided both bottom burning fuel and opportunities to poke through additional stoke holes at the kiln’s base. During the course of the evening, the fires were continually stoked until the entire kiln gently imploded.

Some days later, when all of the delegates and staying guests had gone home, Hoffmann was returning his studio and kiln sheds into some semblance of order, he was to shovel up the remains of Yuri’s kiln. Amongst the debris of ash and fired clay was the molten glass. On closer inspection this would have revealed no doubt, the textures and impressions of the kiln’s dying moments.

Ashes to ashes.