

# Wood Firing Workshops at Castle Hill

## “The Handout”

INSTRUCTOR: Brian Taylor, Ceramics Program Director  
[brian@castlehill.org](mailto:brian@castlehill.org) office 508-349-7511

### Introduction

Welcome!!! If you are reading this you've probably registered for a wood firing workshop with us or you're looking for more information to convince you that you should. Well, wood firing's pretty much the most fun you'll ever have playing with fire, hanging out with potters and altering your sleep schedule. Oh, and your work will come out amazing! If you've read the course description online or in the catalogue and you still want more info, please read on!

### Location

Castle Hill's wood kiln is located at the old North Truro Air Force Base, now called Highland Center, that is approx. 3.5 miles from the main campus. The address to type into your phone is [1 Old Dewline Road, North Truro](#) but you'll need the following directions once you get there. Continue to the end of Old Dewline, through the fenced gate (locked in winter) and pass the large white tent on your right (Payomet Performing Arts Center) and about 50 yards ahead on your left, against the fence line you'll see a small building with a mural, a smokestack and piles of firewood. This is the kiln site. You'll think, "Whoa! This place looks like a zombie apocalypse movie set" because of all the old empty buildings but that's how you know you are in the right place. Park in the parking lot nearest the kiln.

## The Kiln

The type of kiln is called a “Train Kiln” because the profile looks like a train engine. It produces a wide range of results throughout the kiln from light speckling and blushing to completely crusty and runny ash deposits which is what makes this kiln so exciting. We’ve fired the kiln enough times to understand mostly what happens in all parts of the kiln and there’ll be a lot of conversation about what work goes where when we are loading BUT every firing is different and there are lots of factors that change with each firing. Knowing this and preparing for surprising results is the best advice to heed and sometimes hardest to understand.



In the image above, the numbered boxes identify the three main parts of the kiln. Wood is placed into the the firebox (1) where it burns and creates heat, flame and ash. These products are forced down through the firebox and then horizontally from left to right through the ware chamber (2). This is where all of our pieces go. A second and smaller firebox is created in the middle of this chamber to help distribute heat, flame and ash. The chimney (3) is really the workhorse of the kiln. After starting the kiln, the chimney starts to draw, which pulls fresh air into the firebox and helps the wood burn efficiently. This draw has such velocity that we often have a 6 foot flame shooting out of the top of our chimney off and on throughout the second day of the firing.



We fire entirely with wood and it usually takes between 35 and 42 hours depending on several factors. We mostly use donated pine, oak and locust which is cut, split and stacked by myself, my assistants and anyone on firing shifts looking to be helpful ;) wink-wink...

## Preparing Your Work

Lots of clays look great, with and without glaze in this kiln. I typically tell people to choose a clay (ask your supplier) that is created to take advantage of the potential results in a wood kiln. We use Laguna "B-mix for Wood Firing" in our studio and it is quite nice throughout the kiln with a wide range of possibilities. If this is your first time firing with us, I recommend not using much glaze on the outside of pieces so you can better understand what this kiln can do. We'll glaze and load on the first day. If you intend to glaze some or all of your work with your own glazes, please talk to me first.

**ALL WORK MUST BE CONE 10 CLAY!!!** When the wrong clay is fired in a wood kiln it is a total disaster to the pieces around yours, the kiln shelf and the kiln. No joke, I have pictures. When in doubt, PLEASE throw it out.

You should plan to bring **3-4 cubic feet or roughly 30 pieces** of bisqueware to the kiln. The amount of work you actually get into the kiln depends on the size and shape of your work along with the number of students enrolled (min 6, max 10). We strive to get an equal amount of everyone's work in the kiln but there is no guarantee based solely on number or size of pieces you bring. The image below is a guess at the minimum you would get in the kiln but I suggest bringing 5-10 more in case we can squeeze them in. (Based on 10 students and 2 assistants.)



In an attempt to make the loading more fair to everyone involved a jig will be created at the kiln to help measure everyone's work before we load.

**Tip!** Bring a range of sizes and shapes so when we are loading and asking for certain sizes to fit in specific places, your work is always an option. Good shapes to bring that we can squeeze onto almost every shelf are cups and narrow bottles/vases. You can get more of these shapes in your allotted space

too! Shapes that either take up a lot of your space or only fit in a few specific places in the kiln would be large open bowls, plates/platters and bulbous closed forms. They can be beautiful in the kiln and do fit in some places perfectly but they take up a lot of your space.

## The Schedule: a day-day breakdown

**DAY 1:** Meet at the kiln at 9am for orientation and commence glazing and wadding work for the kiln. Wadding is a refractory material used to prop pieces off of the kiln shelf so they don't stick. We will break for lunch (bring your own) and we'll chat about any questions people have and create the firing schedule\*. After lunch, we will begin loading the kiln and continue until we are done with the door bricked up around 4 or 5pm.



\*The firing takes roughly 36 hours which is broken up into 6 hour shifts with 2 people on shift at a time. Shifts start at 6am on Day 2 and go until midnight of Day 3. You should plan to sign up for 2 shifts but whoever works the overnight only does 1. Either I or an assistant with experience will always be available on site or by phone so you are never left to make decisions on your own.



**DAY 2 and 3:** The firing will begin on Day 2 at 6am with a little tiny campfire and we'll slowly increase the temp to roughly 400F by noon. After this we increase the temp until we are at our holding temperature around 2000F or as soon as Cone 7 gets soft in the first cone pack. At this point (hopefully around midnight of Day 1) we change our stoking pattern in the front of the kiln and start side stoking and basically continue this routine

until around midnight of Day 2. The finishing shift is responsible for clean-up and mudding-up the kiln before we leave it to cool for a couple days.

We will provide work/stoking gloves but be sure to wear non-flammable clothing (**NO fleece or raincoats while stoking!!!**), closed toed shoes, hats, bug spray, sunblock, sunglasses and hair ties. **Always wear long sleeved shirts when stoking**, even if it's hot out! Prepare for all types of weather. We have a roof but no walls around the kiln so the elements make themselves known. We have drinking water on site but no proper bathroom so prepare to use the woods, a port-a-potty or make the 1-mile drive to Savory if they are open.

Arrive at your shift 5-10 minutes early so you can get the rundown from the previous shift on the plan of attack. Have fun and be safe! Bring snacks!!!



**Kiln Unloading:** It truly is like one of those holidays where everyone opens presents... Arrive by 9am as most people will actually be a little early and quite anxious to see everything. We usually try to create a line of people from the kiln to the tables so everyone gets a close look at everything. Pieces are collected on the tables in loose order (front, middle, back) as they were in the kiln so we all get a good view of the results. We'll all hang out and enjoy the work for a while and get the kiln area cleaned up. I don't have students participate in the heavy kiln and kiln-shelf grinding but assistance with organizing and cleaning of the kiln site is greatly appreciated. You should expect to be all packed up and leaving before noon.

### Summary:

If you have any questions that I might have missed, please email or call me. If you've read all of this wonderful prose and you still aren't sure if you want to sign up, come to an unloading to see what it's all about or stop by while we are firing and throw some wood in the kiln!

Hope to see you soon!