



Fifth generation potter John Bennett at Bennetts Magill Pottery

BENNETTS MAGILL POTTERY

It is not hard to believe that John Bennett has had a lifetime of working in pottery as he appears in the doorway, a film of clay dust covering his overalls and hands. John, 59, is the fifth generation potter of Bennetts Magill Pottery established by his great-great-grandfather Charles William

Bennett in 1887.

Fire destroyed two previous premises, but the pottery is still doing business on its original site on the residential back streets of Magill. It seems out of place here now but, at the time, the site offered all the natural resources a pottery might need – terracotta clay and plenty of wood to feed its kilns. Neither of these ingredients are relevant today; the kilns are now gas-fired and the clay trucked from Adelaide’s northern suburbs.

The history of this pottery is hidden by the nondescript low-rise red-brick building it is housed in, but is obvious as soon as you walk in. Apart from its newly refurbished display room (thanks to John’s energetic office manager, Karen Brown) the offices are chock-full of dusty fragments of the past, original signage, leather chairs, trophies and old framed photos.

John’s office has only recently had lights installed, “so, now he can see!” Karen says,

laughing at her boss’s no-fuss approach to everything but his pottery. Out the back, where all the action happens, sits century-old machinery still operational thanks to John’s mechanical skills, which he can add to his talents as a potter.

John recalls watching, as a six-year-old, one of the firm’s long-standing potters, Doug, working a pot on the wheel. Doug was so good at what he did that John’s great-grandfather William stopped him from going to fight in

the war, instead asking him to stay and help make stoneware jugs for the military. By all accounts, John’s great-grandfather knew what made a good pot and what didn’t. If he didn’t think a pot was up to scratch, he would pick it up and smash it on the floor.

Bennetts is still known and loved for its hand-made pottery in terracotta and stoneware but, sadly, pottery is no longer the profitable part of the business. The advent of nationwide hardware stores like Bunnings

has taken a large slice out of the market. Whereas once there was a staff of 12, John now has only four other staff to help him. Two are potters like him, the others, Karen, his office manager and the storeman. His two children, Alex, 22, and Eleanor, 20, may get involved in the business later. “Never says never,” says John.

John spends most of his time processing clay for big smelting companies who use it to plug their blast furnaces during operations. Some of that also goes to sculptors, art schools and other members of the public who return their art to Bennetts for firing.

John knows he has been lucky to create a niche business at a time when a small pottery would be likely to founder.

Pots still happen when John can make the time to fit them in. Along with a steady supply to the public of stoneware and terracotta products including garden pots, wine-racks, glazed dishes and mugs, terracotta birdbaths and feeders, dog bowls and tessellated tiles for Adelaide’s heritage roofs, John is also commissioned by Adelaide restaurants for his distinctive stoneware crockery. He has recently created lamp bases ordered by an architect for a restaurant in Japan. New fads replace the old.

The storage jars Bennetts made to preserve food in the days before refrigeration have been replaced by amphora, large terracotta containers that some wineries are using to

LIVING HISTORY

For more than a century – through Federation, two world wars, and a depression – these three SA family businesses have kept their doors open. Now run by the fifth generation, they’ve always moved with the times

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