

Amazing glaze

Research chemist Pierre Bounaud fires up his creative side with his own style of ceramic arts



Pierre Bounaud mixes a glaze in his studio. The chemist in him found experimenting with mixes and layers of glaze on his ceramic pieces to be endlessly appealing. (Eduardo Contreras U-T photos)



A chance encounter with a pottery teacher at a farmers market sparked Bounaud's interest in ceramics.



Bounaud shapes rolled-out clay into one of his food-grade small plate ceramic pieces.





A variety of square plates in Bounaud's studio are bordered with crackle white glaze over black, an experimental combination he was drawn to.



A cheese plate by Bounaud shows artwork derived from a laser printer using toner with iron and special paper that get transferred onto glaze, then fired.

STORY BY CARON GOLDEN PHOTOGRAPHY BY EDUARDO CONTRERAS

It was a small cube vase with a unique textured black-and-white crackle finish that first drew me into Pierre Bounaud's ceramic work. I encountered him through the San Diego Potters' Guild website during the group's virtual semi-

annual sale in November 2020. I went down the rabbit hole to his website, pierrebounaud.com, and found this intriguing vase, which I bought my mom for her birthday. When I drove over to his Talmadge house during the height of the pandemic to pick it up, Bounaud had a few tables set up in front of his open garage to display more vases, as well as mugs, bowls and beautiful sets of square dinnerware, many also finished in this eye-catching glaze.

It's not an accident that Bounaud has explored new solutions to turning his abstract concepts into visual reality. The San Diego-based ceramic artist — born and raised in the Provence region, about an hour north of Marseille — had a longtime career as a research chemist with a Ph.D. in chemistry from New York's SUNY Stonybrook. He moved to San Diego to work at the Scripps Research Institute and then at a biotech company.

"But I was getting burned out doing research and I needed an outlet," Bounaud said. "I needed something else to take my mind off the pressure. My mom recently retired from being a schoolteacher and had taken up pottery and she would tell me about it. I had a

chance encounter at the Hillcrest Farmers Market with a pottery teacher who had a booth there. She was teaching at the Educational Complex Center. I took her flyer and thought, ‘Why not try it?’ I did, and got hooked right away.”

From there, Bounaud joined a class at Clay Associates on Adams Avenue and in 2010 set up his own home studio, which overlooks Mission Valley. There he has a pottery wheel, two kilns, a slab roller to evenly roll out strips of clay, and display shelving. While working, he wears a clay-splattered cream-and-white striped apron, made by his mom, with a slit down the center of the lower half to facilitate sitting at the wheel.

“I started to get the tools I wanted to develop my own voice,” he said. “When you share a studio, you have to use whatever tools they have there so you’re very dependent on what they have to create. I wasn’t truly me until I had my own studio.”

For instance, Bounaud pointed out, without his own kiln, he had no control over the firing and the speed of firing. He was limited in the types of glazes and colors he could use. With his own tools, he could run his own show, he said, do experiments and develop his own processes.

“I’m very process oriented,” said Bounaud, who also works part time at AcKnowledge Regulatory Strategies, a consulting company for the medical device industry. “I focus a lot on technique.”

Among his experiments was the white textured finish on black that I was drawn to. Bounaud explained that it’s a white “crawling glaze” — although he doesn’t like the name and calls it a crackle glaze or, depending on what he makes, a “snowflake.” The glaze naturally cracks and melts during the firing to create the patterns. Bounaud saw it in a book and went searching online for the recipe — yes, there are glaze recipes, even a searchable database on glazy.org for glaze recipes that people post. For the chemist in Bounaud, this was endlessly appealing. He could try out a recipe to see what would happen and then see if he could change it.

“I was interested in that glaze initially because of the texture aspect. I thought, ‘Oh, this is cool, the fact that it’s creating that pattern.’ I could play with that. It’s something you don’t see very often. A lot of glazes have a pattern but they’re flat. But this one has texture on top and I thought that was fascinating. It kept me thinking, ‘What if I can find a way to really highlight that?’ That’s how I came up with the black underneath.”

He kept trying different colors on the porcelainlike clay, but the black base against the white glaze created the most dramatic contrast. It was perfect for the vases he made because the planes of the objects broke up the distinctive finish.

For the dinner plates and other small plates and bowls, however, he’s restrained in how he uses this crawling glaze concept. Placed along the edge of each piece, it serves as a frame around another visual he developed for the body.

“When I started playing with that glaze initially, it was everywhere. It was beautiful but I realized that it was overwhelming,” Bounaud said. “So, my thought process was, what if I was to use less of it? In the end it’s what attracts the eye, and I wanted to move into

something more functional like plates. It wasn't so much having to be food safe — as long as there's no lead, it's fine — but it has to be utilitarian. When I create something that touches the food it's usually going to be a glossy glaze, something flat, that's easy to clean, that won't trap food or damage a knife. But I work hard to make it interesting.”

Again, process. The body of some of his bowls and plates utilizes a smooth multicolor glaze — perhaps black and blue, perhaps orange and black — that Bounaud developed by layering four different glazes in stages to create visual depth. The first layer is a variation on “temmoku,” a Japanese name for iron-rich glazes that were developed by the Chinese and Japanese. He adds two more layers of glazes that add little tweaks of shading and color before applying the final layer, which is the actual color he wants. Each layer must air dry so the water in the glaze is absorbed into the clay before the next goes on and the piece is finally fired.

In other bowls and plates bounded by the crackling glaze edge, Bounaud features patterns in different colors or even pictures. These actually derive from photos that are transferred into the glaze. Bounaud explained that it's a process in which a laser printer using toner with iron in it is used to print on special papers. The printed image is cut out and placed in water, where the top layer of the paper slides off and is placed on the glazed object. During the firing process, everything but that iron image burns away. And while the glaze offers color, the end result has a sepia quality to it.

“Because it's iron, you're limited by the colors iron can give you,” Bounaud said.

Bounaud has sold these plates to clients who use them for dining, as well as serving pieces. He also has made large, round porcelain cheese plates that incorporate numerous cheese labels printed on the clay as well as stamped words. There are matching appetizer plates that also feature those decorative techniques. And he showed me a large container filled with stamps of cheese names that he uses to create small porcelain cheese tags. The crawling glaze shows up in small tumblers that can be held in a square matching tray, as well as teapots. Bounaud's mugs — some in matte glazes, others in wildly colorful royal and indigo blues, turquoise, yellow and red — feature still more unique glazing techniques he's created.

“There are so many different ways that you can express a surface,” he said. “I'm never bored with pottery. There's always something around the corner. That's why my style keeps evolving, changing, because there are so many different avenues I feel like I need to explore.”

Golden is a San Diego freelance writer and blogger.