

## ODE TO THE QUEEN OF CUPS

Searching for that wobble.

BY MIJA RIEDEL

**A**s I drive up toward the hotbed of art studios tucked into the Blue Ridge Mountains, I think of a teacup. The magic of this particular cup, according to the connoisseur who owns it, lies in its wobble. In the frenzy of daily deadlines and minor daily disasters, the wobble forces him to pause and contemplate the moment in his hand. Over many years, I've searched for such a cup in ceramics studios

in Austria, workshops in Greece, cooperatives in Nicaragua, and pit-firings in Peru. Everywhere it is the same: Brilliant mugs are scarce as shooting stars. As I turn into a hairpin curve in the Southern Highlands' dripping forest, I realize I've just arrived in one of the few places in America where I might find my mug—not a mass-produced clunker stamped with a bad reproduction of "Starry Night" or

a frilly china demitasse lacking soul, but a sensual, stop-you-in-your-tracks objet d'art.

For close to one hundred years, the hills around Penland, North Carolina, have operated as the heartland of American craft. Artists and students have pilgrimaged here from fifty-five countries. At the ends of unpaved cul-de-sacs, wedged in the space between open pastures and Baptist churches, potters



throw, glaze, and fire almost daily. And unlike studios in most parts of the country, anyone is welcome to come by, pretty much anytime.

I have two days to explore the hills, and I begin in the artisanal epicenter of the Southern Highlands, the Penland School of Crafts. Mountains circle the campus. Mist wraps around the stone coffeehouse with a neon-pink OPEN sign. I drive past flagstone cottages and weathered wooden cabins—the old dye shed, the weaving studio, the clay and metal workshops.

I'm drawn to warm yellow light spilling from frame windows onto the broad veranda of the Penland Gallery, a worn manor house nearly disappearing in a leafy green thicket. Inside the gallery, teapots line the mantle, beside vases bearing smoky peach halos from kilns reaching twenty-four hundred degrees. And, finally, handmade mugs.

A great mug first draws your eye, then seduces your hand and welcomes your lips. It settles comfortably in your palm. The lip—not thick, not thin, barely noticeable—tips outward to greet your own. The bowl is large enough to hold more than a demitasse of coffee; the handle is sturdy enough to survive the kitchen sink. The empty form is light in your hands, asking to be filled. I've wrapped my fingers around hundreds of handles, and touched my lips to all color of rims, searching for an inspired fusion of form and function that might bring a little magic to morning Colombian Supremo or afternoon Earl Grey.

The Penland Gallery has a surprisingly good mug selection. Ultimately, though, I eliminate each one: Too small, too delicate, too shiny. My cupboards overflow with compromises.

At lunch in the campus café, my coffee is served in an elegant black-and-white mug randomly selected from a diverse collection above the sink. As rain gathers out beyond the closest peaks, I peruse a map that pinpoints over thirty artists in the surrounding hills who would welcome my visit.

Half an hour, half a dozen pastures, and a dozen Baptist churches later, I'm standing on the side of Fork Mountain Road, in a drizzle, beside a cottage sinking in wild flowers. A banner with an image of a ceramic vase flies from the roof. The potter, Suze Lindsay, waves, her beautifully articulated bicep the result of throwing hundreds of pots. Inside

the cottage-gallery, caramel-colored teapots, pale green vases, and large platters with grassy brushstrokes fill the shelves. But no mugs of note. "Inventory's a little low," she says, "new pots will be out of the kiln in a couple of days."

Back down the mountain and across the creek, I find Shane Mickey's wood-fired pots. No one's home but the studio door is ajar and there's a note on the table:

Welcome. Turn on the lights and have a look around. If you see something you like, just leave your check in the jar. Calculator is by the sales book. Wrapping materials under the table. Please remember to turn off the lights when you leave.

Unpainted, clay-splashed shelves are stacked tight with anagama-fired vases and pitchers bearing alternately bright and burnt orange flame-marks, a reference to ceramic traditions going back hundreds of years, crossing dozens of borders, and mingling as many cultures. Really good mugs, too—I want to love them. They're expertly made, original, not too shiny, almost the perfect size. I choose one simply because it's too beautiful to leave behind, but it's missing the subtle wobble I crave.

For the next six hours, I barrel up and down gravel driveways and one-lane roads, studying ceramic casseroles and espresso cups, and talking with artists. The seventy-one-year-old potter Cynthia Bringle shares a studio and gallery with her twin sister, Edwina, a fiber artist. Two or three of Cynthia's masterful mugs catch my eye—one, in particular, with an elaborately carved turtle—but I've learned the hard way that any mug over thirty-five dollars lives a disproportionately short life in my kitchen. Matt Kelleher and Shoko Teruyama, husband-and-wife potters, have installed an exhibition of her intricately patterned porcelain jars and his smoky, soda-fired tea bowls. Matt's tea bowls have no handles—they're *tea bowls*—but I choose one anyway because it's a fat ostrich egg of a cup rippled with waves and just about perfect. Across the railroad tracks, Nicholas Joerling is waiting for a kiln full of new bowls and mugs to cool. "Come on back," he says, "any time this afternoon or this evening. Come if you can't sleep—the door's always open."

I start early the next morning, crisscrossing creeks and railroad tracks from Bakersville to Penland to Burnsville. I zoom up Upper Pig Pen Road and down Lower Pig Pen Road. I stop at potteries with gas kilns, wood-fired kilns, and kilns fired with methane from the Yancey-Mitchell landfill. I knock on doors, flip light switches, and scan unpainted, warped, and knotty pine shelves for the queen of cups.

At 4:30 in the afternoon on Day Two, in a brown-shingled house tucked into a sloping meadow, I meet Jon Ellenbogen and Rebecca Plummer, production potters who throw pitchers, pie plates, honey pots, and everything imaginable, even ceramic sinks. In their gallery, my gaze falls on a quiet, cream-colored mug. From a distance, it looks promising. Warm ocher flecks speckle the cup like sunspots. Pale lavender brushstrokes—light, confident—loop over its surface like the trail of a lightning bug. My palms circle the glazed contours. It's uncommonly soft, less like glass than cashmere. There's nothing wrong with it. I can't put it down, but my eyes, fickle, ever on the prowl, wander to a temoku mug, black and shiny as a wet winter night. Jon wraps one lavender mug and one temoku.

Crazed with my good fortune—convinced I am zeroing in on the noble mug of mugs—I burn deeper into the mountains and stop short in front of an old barn. Inside, it's full of pots—asymmetrical mugs and teacups with saucers. I'm thoroughly seduced, ready to empty my suitcase and haul off everything in sight, and anything else the potter—Gay Smith (absent, but instructions on table)—might ever make in the future. I cluster mugs on a shelf—Group A (Must Have): Twelve mugs with lavish facets. Eight large teacups with saucers. I note the nirvanic stillness of Gay's exquisite pots, so unlike my lustful frenzy. I fret. I downsize. What can't I live without? What's too small, too delicate, too impractical to receive the morning's first, groggy, sloppy stream of coffee? My eyes prefer Gay's mugs but my fingers, fumbling for an easy grip, lobby for the cups. Finally, I choose two—one the cool turquoise of the Blue Ridge, and the other, the amber colors of Penland lights glowing through the light rain. They're wide cups with gentle lips and sturdy handles. They wobble slightly in their saucers. ☞