The whiskey bottle is a form that has interested me for awhile. It is exciting and rewarding to create a form that is used in the celebration and toasting of life’s greatest events. Knowing that the piece you just created will be a part of these memories, and an integral part of the celebration, can give one a sense of meaning in this field.

My bottles are wood fired in a train kiln with a natural-ash glaze. Their voluptuous forms are perfect for a wood-firing and all the color you see in the final form comes solely from the clay reacting to the ash and atmosphere of the kiln. As the flame moves around the piece, ash collects then melts down the curves of the bottle.
Creating a Base Shape
Start off by centering about 3½ pounds of clay into a tall cone shape. Starting with a cone allows the curves of the bottle (narrow base, wide belly, narrow top) to be formed more naturally—it is easier to make a thrown piece wider than it is to narrow it back in. With the cone shape, the wide belly can easily be pushed out, while the top remains narrow. The earlier you can set yourself up to create these natural curves, the better.

Forming the Curves
Once the cone shape is thrown to your desired height, start to belly out the cylinder. The bellying begins gradually at the bottom and becomes more pronounced in the middle, and is created by using one hand on the inside and compressing and refining the curve using a metal rib held against the outside in your other hand (figure 1). Do not let the top get any wider than it was when the cylinder was first thrown. A wide top makes it more difficult to collar in the neck in the next step.

Collar in the neck with both hands encircling the cylinder. As you do this, the neck will thicken and need to be re-thrown to get more height and to thin out the wall. Use a curved rib to make a fluid and continuous curve from the belly to the neck (figure 2).

Defining the Foot
Using a wooden rib with a 90° angle, push down the extra clay at the bottom of the cylinder. The clay will begin to spread out on the wheel. Cut away the excess clay from the wide circle, leaving about ¼ inch of clay on the wheel around the bottle. Finally, slide the rib under the clay to create a slight bevel for visual lift, then use a sponge to soften the edge of the foot into the side of the bottle (figure 3).

Adding Texture
It is easiest to add surface texture while the clay is still wet. I create texture using a dry, stiff-bristle brush. Brush lines vertically up the bottle, starting from the bottom and working to the top around the whole pot (figure 4).

Make a Ledge for a Lid
I use a coil attached to the neck of the bottle as a base for the lid. Let the pot dry until it is leather hard and re-center it on the wheel. Next, roll out a coil that is approximately ½ inch thick and about 3 inches long. To attach the coil, score and slip both the bottle and the coil, then gently press the coil into the neck of the bottle (figure 5). To add more space for the lid to rest on, throw the coil outward, creating a ledge shape. This ledge shape is formed by using the tips of your fingers to pull outward on the coil as if you were throwing a small plate (figure 6). As soon as the ledge for the lid is attached and thrown, take a measurement with your calipers.

It is much easier to throw the lid off the hump and upside down, as you are working with a small amount of clay. Wedge and center approximately one pound of clay. Throw a small cylinder about two inches high and at the same diameter as your caliper measurements (figure 7). Cut it off the hump, let it dry to leather hard, then center the lid right side up on the wheel to be trimmed. When trimming the top of the lid, try to create a continuous shape and mimic the curves of the bottle (figure 8).

Once finished trimming, remove the lid from the wheel and score the roof on the inside of the lid. These score marks will be used to attach a cork stopper to the glaze-fired piece.

Adding a Looped Handle
The handle is a combination of handbuilt and pulled off the form. Start with a coil about 1 inch thick and 2½ inches long. Roll the coil out so that it is slightly tapered in width from one end to the other. Now, hold the thick end of the coil between your thumb and index finger with the raw end facing up. Tap the end of the thick side of the coil to create a concave shape. This concave shape helps add suction when attaching the end of the handle.
to the bottle and when pulling the handle. I pinch my coil into a basic handle shape before attaching it to the bottle and pulling it. The handle is attached upside down about 2 inches below the lip with the thicker end of the handle attached at the bottom and then curled up and over to form the rest of the handle. Be sure to score and slip both attachment areas. Smooth all the areas around the attachment then hold the bottle upside down and pull and form the handle until you’ve reached a comfortable thickness (figure 9). The pulled handle should be about 3½ inches long. Turn the bottle right side up and curl the pulled and tapered part of the handle under the rim ledge and attach it to the bottle so it nearly touches the bottom attachment.

It is important in this step to pay attention to the negative space created by the curl and to try to achieve a good balance of proportions. If necessary to achieve this, cut off any excess length in the handle. Using a sponge, smooth all areas of the attachment making a seamless fit between bottle and handle, being careful to not overwork the areas (figure 10).

About twenty years ago I was bringing a ware board full of bottles back into the shop after setting them in the sun for a while to stiffen up for trimming. While I was fiddling with the door, a pot on the end of the board fell to the ground. After taking the rest of the pots into the shop, I went back and picked up the one that was flat on its side. To me, the obvious thing to do now was to pick it up and drop it on the other side to see what would happen. It completely collapsed, but I kind of liked the form so I blew into it. Lo and behold, it turned into what I thought was an incredible shape and I’ve been making it ever since, because I love having a pot with two or more surfaces to decorate. Now, of course, I make sure I have a little more control over the process.
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Process
I start by making a variety of bottle shapes using anywhere between 3 and 5 pounds of clay (figure 1). I allow the pots to dry to a soft leather-hard state so that when they’re rolled they won’t completely collapse. I realize that the term soft leather hard is very subjective, so you’ll need to do some experimenting to find the right working state for you. If the clay is too soft, the pot will completely collapse and if it’s too hard, the pot may crack when rolled.

Place the bottle on its side on a canvas covered ware board or piece of sheetrock (figure 2). Be sure to roll the pot on something similar since the clay will stick to non-absorbent surfaces. For best results, your hand should be relaxed but firm while rolling back and forth. Be sure to use your palm and not your fingers as they will make unwanted marks and dimples on the surface (figure 3).

After rolling one side (figure 4), pick up the pot cleanly by pulling it straight up off the rolling surface rather than rolling it up onto its foot (figure 5). If this is not done properly, the foot can get flattened on one side and may be difficult to repair. Next, turn the form to the other side, and repeat the same process. If the form becomes concave on either side, carefully pick the pot up and lightly blow into the opening to get the desired shape (figure 6). The piece could also be rolled on three or more sides to get even more variations and shapes. If the bottle is rolled back and forth over half way on both sides until the rolls meet, a really nice point or hard edge can be achieved on both ends. Sometimes I paddle the meeting points on each side to get an even crisper angle.

Rolling thrown forms to alter their shape and create different planes on the surface is an easy and effective way to expand your technical vocabulary. There are countless ways that you could expand on this technique.
As a curious little girl I was always fascinated with small sets of serving pieces that were used on a daily basis. Sets of chartreuse-colored Russel Wright dinnerware designed in the late 1930s sat before me while visiting my grandmother on the weekends. These simple but interesting forms with bird-like spouts, voluptuous curves, and deep-set lids had character to them.

At my own home, intricate but dainty China dishes handed down from my maternal great-grandmother made their home in our family china cabinet. They were brought out for special occasions and handled with the utmost care. These pieces included creamers and sugar bowls, salt and pepper sets, jam jars, and butter dishes. In my mind, these inanimate objects, with their dainty feet, handles that looked like shoulders and hands, and, most of all, fancy painted surfaces that looked like party dresses, came alive in my imagination.

Over the years, I have explored the concept of sets and how to combine the whimsical aspect of my work with the functionality of these forms. My favorite sets to make are salt and pepper shakers. This particular set represents a couple to me, while the tray represents a stage they converse on. In my creative process, I want the viewer to see a character or form that speaks to them, but I also know as a functional potter that the object needs to work well. The user needs to be comfortable with handling the shakers while also enjoying the unorthodox form and embellishments that I enjoy creating.

Trays are still a challenging part to these sets but also provide so many choices and options for growth and change. I am always reevaluating their function, the design, and how they interact with the salt and pepper shakers. I have made functional trays with handles over the top and on the side. I have made trays that look like anything from a theater dome to a cradle. This new tray is a pedestal stage for my characters.

Throwing Slabs
All of my oval, square, or closed forms are thrown without a bottom, so that has to be created separately. When I make the bottoms to all my pieces, they start off on the wheel. They’re not a flat pancake as you might guess, but rather start as a bottomless cylinder. I prefer throwing these slab bottoms over other methods of slab making because, as a thrower, I can work more quickly on the wheel head than on a flat surface.

To make the bottoms of the salt and pepper shakers, use a small ball of clay (around ½ pound) to create the cylinder. Clean up the side walls and make a vertical cut from top to bottom. After doing this, cut the cylinder off the wheel, and lay it flat on a ware board lined with paper or canvas, like a slab. Carefully smooth out the throwing marks and use a large spackling knife to smooth and level it. A rib would also work. The finished slab should be ¼ inch thick for stability and shrinkage.

Throwing the Shakers
For the salt and pepper shaker form, throw another bottomless form that is convex rather than straight sided using ½ pound of clay (figure 1). Collar in the rounded shape to make a closed form with a slightly pointed top (figure 2). The form needs to be between ½ and ⅛ of an inch thick,
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with a little extra clay left at the bottom. The extra thickness helps when attaching this piece to the thrown slab, and is shaved away using a Surform tool when refining the thrown shape.

Before taking the form off the wheel head, go back to the slab and score the entire area where the form will sit. Add a little water to the scored part to help secure the seal between the slab and the form. Take the form off the wheel head, gently push two sides toward each other to form an oval, then place the form on the scored section of the slab. Push the extra clay on the outside edge of the shaker down into the slab to form a seal (figure 3).

Let these forms set up to leather hard, then cut through the slab around the outside bottom edge of the shaker. Next, use a Surform tool or blade to shave away any excess clay (figure 4). I find that holding the blade on its own (without the handle) allows me to keep even pressure while removing clay. Do not trim too much clay away or you will make a weak spot or hole in the wall of your shaker. Once you have shaped the salt and pepper forms, take a metal rib and gently smooth out the rasp marks. The final step before the adding the feet is to create a hole in the top so air can escape.

Foot Support

The feet for the shakers have continually evolved. Like many potters, I am always looking through old books and magazines or just playing with clay to figure out new ways to make feet. The feet and the embellishments are very important parts for me; these added body parts are what brings life or animation to the pieces. I see the embellishments as accessories or clothing for my sets.

Start off by marking where the feet should sit. Be careful not to place them too far in or too far out. Try different spots with spare clay balls before attaching the real feet making sure that, in the arrangement you choose, the feet hold up the body well so there is no threat of rocking or tipping over.

To make feet like those shown here, take a lug or bar of clay and square it off. Cut equal sections and work in groups of four. Take the sections and carefully square them off more, then taper one end where the foot meets the table and flatten the other for the attachment point. The process is much like thinking about, then echoing, the way that your legs support your body; the hip bone attaches your leg to the body, and your feet and toes provide the contact to the ground.

When adding the feet, score and slip both sections and then carefully push the fat part of the foot into the form. You can finish the top part of the hip anyway you would like. I choose to flatten it out by rubbing my thumb back and forth. After the front side of the foot is done, turn it over and reinforce the legs with small coils of soft clay (figure 5). Finally take the entire piece and tap it on the table surface to make sure it doesn’t wobble and that the form is level (figure 6).

After attaching the feet, make a small hole (a little bigger than ¼ of an inch) in the bottom of each shaker with an X-Acto knife. This is the fill hole for pouring in the salt or pepper. After firing, it will be sealed with a small cork. To reinforce this hole take a very small coil and score, slip, and attach it around the hole. The corks I use come from a home improvement store and can be purchased in a wide variety of sizes. I usually keep a variety of sizes on hand since I don’t measure every hole I cut.

After you’ve finished the adornments, use a drill bit or the end of an X-Acto knife for putting in the holes for dispensing the salt and pepper (figure 7). Be careful not to make the hole too big or too small.

Creating the Tray

For the tray, start by making a thrown slab. This time the slab will form the top of the tray rather than the bottom. Use approximately ¼ pound of clay to throw the bottomless cylinder and throw it to a height that will comfortably fit your shakers when laid out as a slab (the height becomes the width of the slab).

Use another ½-pound ball of clay for the bottomless cylinder that makes up the base of the tray.
In order to ensure that the shaker set will fit on the tray, I place two shakers very lightly on my slab and make a slight impression so I can get an idea of how wide I need to make the cylinder. I then take a string and measure the perimeter of this area (figure 8). That measurement becomes the circumference for the thrown foot ring (figure 9). Remember to leave a ledge on the outer part of the ring. This ledge will once again help with securing down the cylinder to the slab. Clean up the sides with a metal rib and use a sponge to make sure the edge is rounded off.

Transfer the cylinder to the slab. It’s a bit tricky and needs to be done quickly. First, score the slab where it will attach to the foot ring and add a small amount of water to create a suction between the two parts. Cut the freshly thrown rim off of the bat and quickly but gently pick it up using both hands (figure 10) and place it on the slab. Carefully reform the ring to match the scored area on the slab, whether that is round, oval, or squared. Press the extra ledge of clay from the bottom of the ring into the slab to secure the join.

Let the tray set up until it is leather hard, and repeat the finishing with a Surform the same way as the shaker. Once the tray is refined and has set up (but is still leather hard), add a lip around the top edge using clay pressed from a mold (figure 11). This prevents the shakers from sliding off. After attaching it, go back with a small coil of soft clay and reinforce the seam.

Finishing
While the piece is leather hard, I apply stain to certain areas with incised lines or textures, and then scrape off the excess. Once my pieces are bisque fired, I usually dab water on the holes before glazing to keep glaze in that area thin so that it does not clog the hole. If you find that it does flow into the hole during the firing, a diamond drill bit works wonders for drilling out the clogged hole. The last step is adding a cork to seal the fill hole in the bottom of the shakers (figure 12).

Stopperless salt and pepper shakers are made with an inner funnel. They are filled upside down, pouring salt into the funnel. When turned right side up, the salt is trapped inside. To dispense, they are shaken over your food to allow the salt to bounce off the top and make its way back through the funnel (see diagram on page 16). They are made like a double-walled vessel, but instead of joining the inner and outer walls, the inner wall is closed in on itself to form the funnel. And the other wall is brought up higher and closed above the inner to create the space that holds the salt.
Elapsed Time

Depending on the size of your hands, the amount of clay will vary between ¾ and 1¼ pounds. I don’t have overly large hands, but when throwing these with less than a pound, it’s difficult to get my fingers where I want them to go. However, if the forms are too large, they are difficult to use. Center the clay and press your finger all the way down until you reach the bat. You want the opening to be about an inch or so in diameter.

Create a stair step in the ring by lifting your finger to about halfway up on the inside of the ring and pressing outward toward the side wall, which will open the sides more (figure 1). Leave about a ½-inch thickness of clay between your finger and the outer edge of the ring (maybe even more). Now, press down on the step, leaving enough clay to pull up your inside funnel (figure 2). You are essentially making a double-walled vessel, but the inner wall is actually a closed cone form. You will find you really don’t need much clay to create this inner funnel. It’s all about using your fingertips and pinches to pull the walls up. Try to pull it up to about 2–3 inches in height.

Once you have the funnel high enough, collar it in and close it off. Try to just close off the top; you want the funnel hollow, not solid, because later you will want to drill your hole and you do not want to have to drill forever (figure 3). I also flatten the top of the funnel slightly. I think this helps catch more salt when shaken. Take a sponge and mop up any extra water in the recesses.

Now pull your outer walls up. You want this wall to easily clear the height of the funnel, and you want plenty of room between the top of the form and the top of the funnel or else salt won’t be able to travel in and out (figure 4). Once you’ve raised the outer wall enough that it clears the inner funnel, sponge out any water and collar in and close the form at the top (figure 5). Once the form is closed, air is trapped inside and the vessel begins to act like a balloon when altered or ribbed (figure 6).

After you have the shape you want, smooth the surface and add finishing touches with a rib (figure 7). At this point, pulling it off the bat is essential for me. Inevitably I either forget to and/or can’t reach a sponge into the center to mop up any extra water that has collected inside the funnel. Removing it from the bat allows excess water to evaporate through the bottom. At the same time, throw a small chuck about the same diameter as the shoulder of your vessel. It should dry alongside your shaker.

When both are leather hard, I use a combination of the Giffin Grip and a chuck to trim a shaker with a pointed top like this (figure 8). If your shaker is flat at the top or just slightly rounded, a chuck is probably unnecessary. If you don’t have a Giffin Grip, simply center, then attach your piece (or your chuck) to the wheel head using four balls of clay, or place slightly rounded forms onto a small ring or coil of clay. When using a chuck, remember to check that your piece is level using...
9. Try not to let any shavings from trimming fall into the funnel as you work.

10. Drill a hole into the top of the funnel from the bottom of the form.

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a bubble (torpedo) level before starting to trim. Define the width of your foot ring and trim the bottom. Trim both the outside edge and the area leading into the funnel to remove excess clay and refine the shape, but try not to let any shavings fall into the funnel as you work (figure 9).

Drill a hole into the top of the funnel from the bottom (figure 10). I’ve found an 1⁄8 inch drill bit is just about the perfect size. This lets a fair amount of salt in easily, without dumping too much when you are dispensing.

Glazing is pretty simple, just make sure no glaze gets inside the funnel or closes the hole. If you dip, just hold it upright and dip it into the glaze, the air trapped inside will keep the glaze from entering the funnel.

After glaze firing, fill the funnel with salt or pepper. You may have to give it a gentle shake to help the salt travel down. Once it’s full, flip it right side up. The salt will fill into the vessel.

To dispense, simply give it a little shake over your food and salt or pepper will find its way to the hole and sprinkle out.

Note: Just wash the outside with a damp rag and soap. Do not place stopperless shakers in a dishwasher. If water gets inside the shaker, it is nearly impossible to dry out; however, you can place them in a warm oven for an hour to dry out.

To fill this type of shaker, turn it upside down and pour salt or pepper into the funnel. Once it is turned right side up, the salt is safely stored in the area around the funnel. To use it, shake vertically to release salt over the top of the funnel form.