

growlerfest

by Amanda Barr

With a surge in the popularity of home beer brewing and local micro breweries continuing across the US, we're seeing the revival of the iconic beer-carrying container also making a comeback in our studios.



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It began with a phone call. “What would you think about working on something about growlers?” Alexandra (Alex) Jelleberg, who is a resident artist and coordinator at Project Art in Cummington, Massachusetts, was looking for a new project to feature local craft brew and foods. She immediately thought of Bradley Klem, a friend from Arizona State University, who had his growlers showcased in *Ceramics Monthly’s* Undergraduate Showcase in September, 2014. The two had forged a friendship over kilns and beers at Casey’s near their Phoenix campus, and Jelleberg describes Klem as precise, amiable, and a consummate professional with a focused attention to detail. According to Klem, he was instantly engaged by the project. He already had an interest in growlers and had been making them for a while, but it was really Jelleberg herself that made him enthusiastic. “I knew we worked well together,” he explains. “When she says, ‘we can do this,’ I completely believe it. Thus, GrowlerFest was born.”

GrowlerFest 2015 was planned over a year in advance and took 6 months to create. It involved 15 invited artists, 75 handmade growlers, custom decals, gallery and local craft brewery participation, local food sourcing, 9 local artists, and a partnership with Portland Growler Company to produce another 15 sets of limited edition manufactured growlers. They managed to get some sponsorships to help fund all of this, but the majority of the coordinating fell to Jelleberg and Klem—making their trust in each other, the project, and their partnership pivotal to the project’s success. Klem is currently the studio manager, instructor, and resident artist at the Mesa Arts Center in Mesa, Arizona, and Jelleberg is based in Massachusetts, where she works for Ferrin Contemporary, which meant a lot of phone conversations and emails exchanged. Eventually Klem would travel to Cummington, to complete the handmade growlers.

GrowlerFest isn’t simply about making containers for beer: the desire is to create interest and connect the flourishing craft brewing community with potters and other artists.



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1 Bradley Klem's *Moonshiner*, 13 in. (32 cm) in height (holds 64 oz.), porcelain, ceramic decal. 2, 4, 5 Installation views of GrowlerFest 2015 East at Project Art's Summer Gallery in Cummington, Massachusetts. 3 Bradley Klem's growler featuring graphics by Sergei Isupov, 13 in. (33 cm) in height (holds 64 oz.), porcelain, ceramic decal, 2015. 2–5 Photos: Johnpolakphotography.com.

“Through the intersection of collaboration and individual aesthetic, we hope to spark investment in handmade objects among a group of people who share a common interest. The enjoyment of food and drink can be greatly enriched by the experience of using the beautiful work artists so thoughtfully produce.”

By creating and manufacturing the actual growlers, then asking collaborating artists to decorate them—by drawing or printing on a template that was then made into decals—Klem and Jelleberg hoped to intertwine artists working in disparate ways and faraway places to both each other and the craft beer movement. The surfaces of the growlers became the medium, and the exhibition, with both functional and decorative elements, would draw parallels and comparisons in form, style, design, and philosophy between local and global ceramic artists.

In the fall of 2014, Project Art and Australian artist Vipoo Srivilasa sponsored ArtKamp, an intimate collaborative tableware project with seven invited artists combining processes, aesthetics, and opinions. The project was so enjoyable and successful that Jelleberg hoped to create a new variation on the concept as part of GrowlerFest. Once the basis for the project was formed, Jelleberg and Klem thought

of Brett Binford and his business partner Chris Lyon, who are known for two major ceramic entities—Mudshark Studios and Portland Growler Company. For GrowlerFest, graphic clay artists Molly Anne Bishop, Jessica Brandl, Chandra DeBuse, Carole Epp, Lauren Gallaspy, Kathy King, Sergei Isupov, Justin Rothshank, Paul Scott, Vipoo Srivilasa, Mara Superior, Jason Walker, and Kurt Weiser were invited to participate. They were asked to print, draw, or decorate a template, then scan and send it to the organizers so it could be produced into decals. They were also invited to provide drinking vessels if they chose. Local Massachusetts artists Robbie Heidinger, Tiffany Hilton, Jeffrey Lipton, Maya Machin, Michael McCarthy, Steve Théberge, and Elenor Wilson also contributed drinking and pouring vessels that were part of the GrowlerFest East exhibition, while the Eutectic Gallery in Portland, Oregon, worked with Adora Bella Ceramics to feature their keg cups.

In order to create 60 growlers for the shows, Klem partnered with Eutectic Gallery and Binford, who produced 30 versions of the growlers in their facility, applied the decals and fired them, while Klem threw the other 30 growlers and applied the decals to them. These growlers are made of porcelain with stoneware lids attached with 12-gauge steel wire, some of which, aside from the decals, also feature china paints.

The idea to create a show entirely about growlers may seem a bit strange, as most people are unfamiliar with the form, but the show generated some real interest. Melinda Sanders and Mark Shiffman, Massachusetts area collectors, said they came to the show because of a mutual interest in good local breweries, and a love of functional ceramics. Shiffman says they particularly collect the “quintessentially functional” and that growlers have a great function-

CLAY CULTURE



6 Brad Klem's growler, *Redfish* (porcelain, ceramic decal, china paint), being filled at Wilderness Brewing Co. in Mesa, Arizona. 7 Brad Klem's *Buyer's Remorse* beer tumblers, 6½ in. (16 cm), porcelain, ceramic decal, china paint. Photo: Johnpolakphotography.com.

ality for the beer lover. Sanders personally really enjoys shows of collaborative work, and she purchased Klem's growler featuring an old man and the still—a combination of brewing, history, and art. “The growlers are really different than anything else we have in our collection, they're really unique—they're not bowls, they're not cups, they're not teapots, they're really cool.” Sanders and Shiffman eventually ended up going home with several growlers and mugs, and look forward to seeing more artists working with the form.

Since GrowlerFest 2015, Jelleberg and Klem have been busy with future plans for more GrowlerFests. The first year of any event can be a great learning experience, from making contacts and learning to nail the timing, to gauging reactions and addressing any changes that need to be made. At the same time, they are making sure to take the time to appreciate what they created. Both Jelleberg and Klem say they looked at the first year as a quintessential pilot experience, complete with could haves and should haves, that will inform future projects. They took a risk, and it worked—coordinating shows on both coasts, partnering with artists, breweries, galleries, and chefs to pull off a very fun event. This past spring, they hosted GrowlerFest 2016 at Free State Brewing Company in Lawrence, Kansas during the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) conference. This event was as a reiteration of the 2015 show, to expose the idea to a larger ceramic (and craft brewing) audience with the help of the Lawrence Arts Center and curator Ben Ahlvers.

Expect to see more of GrowlerFest. According to Klem, this coming year they are working on ideas that would invite more artists to participate. One would involve working with Portland Growler Company to create blank, bisque-fired growlers to send out and have artists finish, and then jury a show based on the completed pieces. A second would be a juried show of artist-made growlers. Interest in making the form has increased a little more recently, though it's not prolific (yet), which puts limits on this type of show for now. Klem and Jelleberg hope to spark interest in the growler form among makers, and in turn reach out to the craft brewing movement to generate an audience who is clearly already interested in the handmade ethos. Klem himself is a home brewer; what two hobbies unite better than brewing and making growlers? Let's hope the movement catches on, and we can see more growlers and GrowlerFests expanding in the future.

the author *Amanda Barr is currently a resident artist at Pottery Northwest in Seattle, Washington. To learn more, www.amandambarr.com.*

A Brief History of the Growler

Late 1800s

Burping pots: Fresh beer is carried home from the local pub in a small galvanized pail. The name “growler” is said to describe the rumbling sound as the carbonation escaped through the lids when the beer sloshed around the pail.

Before WWII, when city kids brought these growlers from a local bar or brewery to workers at lunch or their parents at dinner, it was called “rushing the growler.”

1920s

Prohibition: All alcohol is banned in the US, outlawing the growler. Illegal moonshining stills begin manufacturing anywhere there is water, filling jugs with moonshine and whiskey. In 1933 Prohibition is repealed.

1950s

Waxed cardboard containers with lids are used to take home beer, but it is illegal in most states to sell liquor on Sundays, so bars would sell growlers of beer.

1980s

In 1989 Charlie Otto of Otto Brothers' Brewing Company (now the Grand Teton Brewing Company) starts offering “beer to go,” but without the ability to bottle he goes old school and begins using growlers. Updating the idea for modern marketing times, he purchases a silkscreening machine and begins placing his logo on half gallon glass bottles. The modern growler is born.

2000s

The explosion of the craft beer and home-brewing movements has made a market for collectable growlers, generally made of glass or ceramic and 64 oz in size (1 gallon). Many are now made to resemble moonshine jugs as a nod to the history of home brewing.