

BRAZIL

THE KILNS OF CUNHA

There's a Japanese twist to this Brazilian state's time-honoured tradition

WORDS: LAURA PRICE

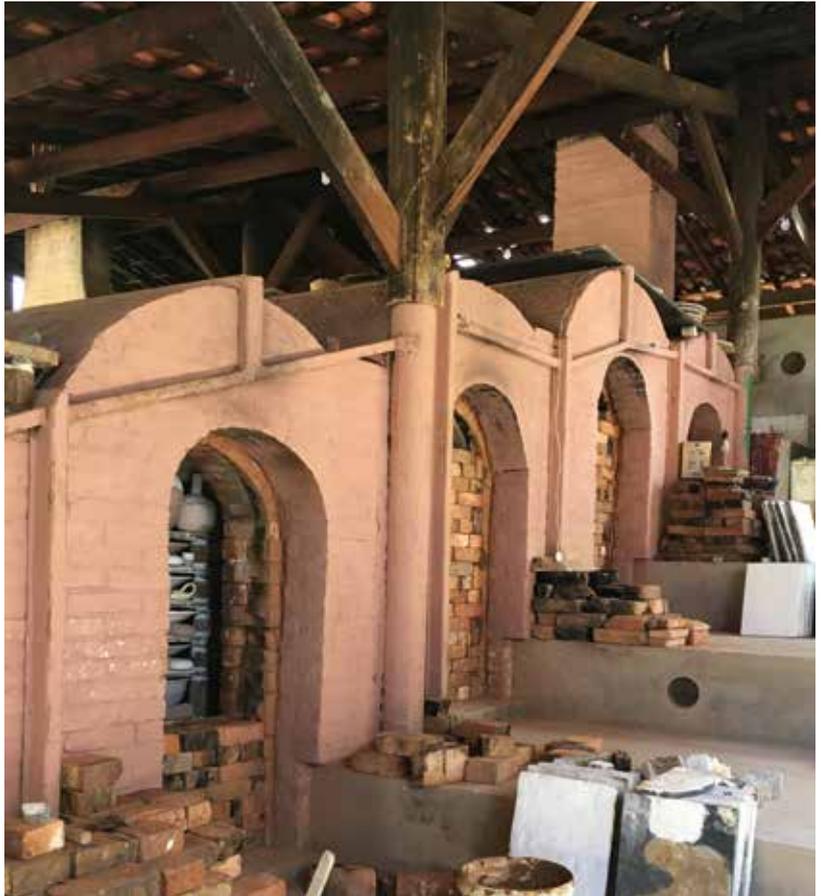
Ceramics craftsmanship may have been lost to mass production in many parts of the world, but in the mountains of Cunha, in São Paulo state, the tradition of baking pottery in handmade kilns is alive and well. The red clay hills flanking the Paraíba Valley between São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro are shaped by a history of brick making, but in Cunha a new tradition of ceramics is springing to life. Thanks to Japanese immigration in the 1970s, local potters have learnt to use noborigama ovens, a series of igloo-like interconnected kilns that climb up a set of concrete steps. On designated burn dates throughout the year, Cunha's ceramics ateliers fire up their kilns to cook thousands of pieces in one go.

At Oficina de Cerâmica, Augusto Campos prepares for burn day by spending weeks inside the chambers of his kiln, painstakingly loading painted clay pots, jugs and vases onto shelves separated by bricks. Each item has been pre-cooked, dried and painted with hand-developed enamel glazes. Finally, he closes each chamber with a wall of bricks before plastering it shut.

On the day itself, Campos is up at 5am to begin loading firewood into the bottom rung of his noborigama kiln. He'll continue feeding in wooden planks for the next 30 hours until the temperature reaches 1,400C, when the pottery will be cooked. To measure the temperature, one brick in each chamber wall is kept loose, so that Campos can peek inside. A tiny porcelain finger placed inside each kiln will melt once the optimum temperature is reached. The oven will then be left to cool for a week before the pottery pieces are extracted.

The opening of the kiln has been the most important day in Cunha's calendar since the inaugural event in 1988. For tourists and locals, it's a chance to learn about an increasingly rare craft and to witness the treasures emerge from the ovens. For artisans like Campos and his peers at Atelier de Cerâmica Suenaga & Jardineiro, it's a source of immense pride, essential income and a chance to show the fruits of their labour of love.

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