



**TRAZ, ZAS, TAZ!
VAMOS VER COMO O OLEIRO FAZ!**

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BLACK POTTERY OF BISALHÃES, WHAT IS IT?

Would you like to know the story of the black pottery of Bisalhães? This story might well start with the expression “Once upon a time”, which you probably heard many times. However, that would take us to a period lost in time. Fortunately, we know where everything happens – and it is close by... Bisalhães, a village located on the southern slopes of the parish of Mondrões, municipality of Vila Real, in Portugal.

The pottery of Bisalhães has long been made in a traditional manner and is famed for the very feature that sets it apart from other pottery: the black colour! This craft is part of a tradition hailing from the town of Bisalhães and the oldest record of a potter active in this village dates back to 1709, more than three hundred years ago!

The manufacturing process of the black pottery of Bisalhães was listed as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, which needs Urgent Safeguarding by UNESCO, on 29 November 2016. This means that measures must be put into place to preserve this art and recognise the black pottery of Bisalhães as one of the many cultural treasures of our country!



WHO PERFORMS THIS CRAFT?

In Bisalhães, pottery is traditionally a family craft. The process is conducted by both men and women from beginning to end, with each one fulfilling their role.

Pottery is usually made by men, that is, they are the ones who mould and shape the clay on the wheel. Women generally decorate the pieces and sell them. However, overall, it is a collective craft! In Bisalhães, this tradition is passed on from generation to generation, with parents teaching their children and grandparents teaching their grandchildren. Thus, this tradition is more than a mere craft or task; it is a moment of conviviality, a work created in the home of these families that find their way into our homes!



CLAY: THE RAW MATERIAL

Clay is a type of clay suitable for making crockery and is extracted from sedimentary rocks.

Unlike other rocks, these are not hard and can be removed with some ease. The clay used to make the black pottery of Bisalhães has a light cream colour and was initially extracted from natural sources in our municipality. Nowadays, potters go to Chaves to buy it, but even this clay is increasingly scarce. Hence, it has to be protected!

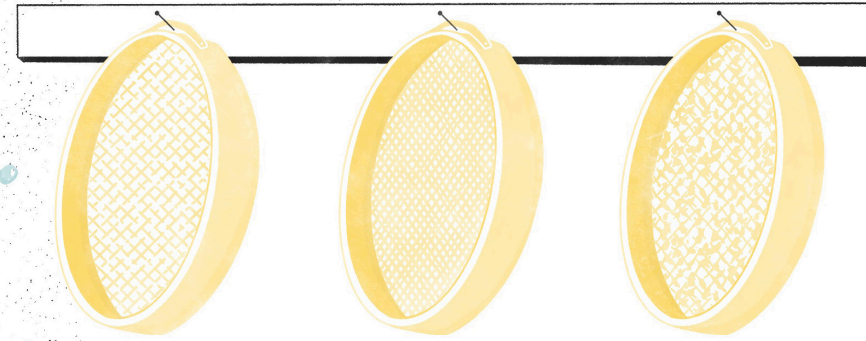
GRINDING THE CLAY

The pottery tradition of Bisalhães is a complex and time-consuming process, which involves preparing the clay, modelling and firing it. First, we need the raw material: clay. Then, we start by grinding the clay, hitting it with a hammer until it is nearly reduced to dust!



SIFTING THE CLAY

The process of sifting the clay is very important to remove stones, roots, dry branches, coarse sand and all the rubbish that does not belong in the clay: in short, we will make the clay cleaner. To sift the clay, we need a sieve, where we put the ground clay.



Then just shake the clay powder from side to side. A different sieve is used for each purpose. For earthenware, we use a corn sieve, for finer pottery, a flour mesh sieve and for fine china, a fine silk mesh sieve.

KNEADING THE CLAY

The clay is sifted into a trough, a small granite tank, where clay is kneaded with water and then squeezed, as it happens when we make a cake or pizza dough. This squeezed clay is called beloiro or pele (formed prepared pieces of clay). To keep the clay pieces moist and not dry out, they are wrapped in plastic



SHAPING THE CLAY

As you might have thought, the potter's task is divided into several stages. We will now explain how clay is shaped. To create a piece, the potter takes the amount of clay needed and shapes it into a cylindrical or spherical shape in his hands. Then the potter throws the piece of clay onto the centre of the wheel, giving it little strokes with his hands so that it sticks to the wheel. Then, the magic happens. The potter's hands start shaping the clay. The potter's technique as well as years of expertise are key to the process, as it will dictate the speed of execution and the perfection of the piece!



TOOLS USED TO SHAPE THE CLAY

You must have realized by now that the potter's essential and magical tool is his hands. However, the potter needs the help of other tools to shape the clay! Generally, the potter uses a knife, a set of fanadoiros (coarse scrapers) and a wet rag.

Fanadoiros are wooden scrapers made of willow or cork wood that come in different sizes and are used to flatten, widen, smooth and raise the clay. Water also plays an important role in modelling, so the potter always has a bowl of water nearby.

DRYING THE CLAY

Nature plays a very important role in this entire process, the raw material comes from the earth and it is thanks to the sun that it dries out.

Once finished, the pieces are placed to dry out in the sun or preferably in the shade, to prevent cracking. In a few days or even a few hours, depending on the time of year, the pieces are ready to be decorated.



DECORATING THE POTTERY

At this stage, the work of women comes into “play”. After being sanded, the pieces are decorated with the help of a small smooth river stone stylus, called the gogo. Traditionally, this work is done by women. With a smaller and sharper gogo, they draw small figures on the surface of the clay, giving them an even more personalised and artistic touch!



PIT FIRING THE CLAY

After the clay pieces have dried out and been decorated, they go into the kiln, though not a conventional kiln. This is a different type of kiln that is built into the soil! As a rule, these kilns are a round shaped pit about one-meter deep and two meters in diameter. The kiln is made of clay with a stone frontage that accommodates a door. The firewood, crucial to fire the pieces, is placed under a grill in the first phase and as it is fuelled, the batch acquires a reddish colour. This type of wood is essential to impart the black colour typical of these pieces so that they can look lustrous and uniform – broom plant, moss and carquejas (*Pterospartum tridentatum*) are burnt as fuel.



PIT FIRING TIME

You have probably made cakes in the oven, however, this “oven” is very peculiar, and so is its firing time! Taking into account all the process involved in the making of pottery, firing the clay can practically take a whole day! Potters and women begin to carry the pottery and firewood to the pit before sunrise. Then, they have to pile the pieces more or less securely in the pit and place the wood little by little until it reaches the ideal temperature. When the flames take hold of the pieces, green pine branches are placed on top of the pottery, which is then covered by the door sealed with moss and soil for three hours. Afterwards, it is necessary to wait a little longer for the pieces to cool down before removing them. The black colour of the pottery is due to this firing process, and the main cause of this phenomenon is the absence of oxygen when the pit is completely sealed. When a batch is full, hundreds of pieces are fired together.



FINAL PIECE

We have reached the last stage. This stage also shows us the unique identity of this pottery and art. After the pit firing, the pottery is ready to be sold! However, we still have to take it back to the workshops, clean it and check for broken pieces during the process. Some pieces generally will not withstand the firing process! This is what sets Bisalhães pottery apart from other pottery. Each piece is special, shaped by the hands of the potter, designed by the hands of women and coloured by the density of the smoke. Each piece has its own identity. No piece is equal, but they may look identical, hence their uniqueness!

SELLING THE POTTERY

Back in the day, once ready, the pottery was carried in large baskets to the roadside or to town markets to be sold. It also served as a “currency” of exchange and potters exchanged it for onions, chestnuts or potatoes, depending on the season. The biggest black pottery fair was the fair of São Pedro, in Vila Real, where Largo da Capela Nova was filled with black “pearls”. Nowadays, the potters of Bisalhães have their own stalls in Vila Real, by the roadside, where they produce and sell their traditional pieces.

Some of the most traditional pieces of black pottery from Bisalhães are the so-called Bilha do Segredo (a black terracotta jug with a small spout on the top), the Bilha de Rosca (a black terracotta decanter), the Pucarinhos (black terracotta amphorae with lid), the Alguidar (black terracotta terrine), the Assadeira (black terracotta baking tray) and the Pichorra (black terracotta pitcher). Though there are many more!





This ancestral art is currently endangered, due to the advanced age of the men and women who still perform this craft and the lack of interest by young people. Hence, it is necessary to sustain it and keep it alive! Thus, we challenge you to become part of the Safeguarding Patrol of Bisalhães Pottery! How to do that? Easy - by promoting and studying this craft. Who knows, you might even become a potter yourself! We are counting on you!

