



DUST to ART

Up in the Sierra de la Giganta Mountains, a local woman works the earth, literally, into usable art

~by Michael Koehn | photos by Paul Papanek~

“It’s not a dangerous road,” Sergio, our guide, assures us, “unless, of course, they are practicing for the Baja 1,000 here. If your timing is bad and you happen to run into one of those buggies coming at you sideways from the opposite direction, then it can get pretty tricky.”

It’s easy to see why they might want to use this part of the country to wring out those Baja buggies. We’re on a rough hewn narrow dirt road, let’s call it one lane, cut through the mountains with a basic road grader, precipitous in places, with some running water to splash through and an occasional

boulder just waiting to wreak some bowling ball-sized damage to an unprotected oil pan.

We feel very safe, though, as we’re firmly belted into Sergio’s Suburban, photographer Paul, his wife Joan and I on our way to a rendezvous with a small village and a simpler lifestyle, a loosely-knit community called

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San Vicente up in the Sierra de la Laguna Mountains, where a woman they call Doña Ramona maintains some of the arts and crafts traditions that have been unchanged for a couple of hundred years.

"When the Jesuits came to this part of Baja back in the 1700s," Sergio explains, "they told the local people that if they wanted something to cook in they should make it themselves."

And that's what they did. Finding a local source for clay, these hardy mountain people began creating very simple, utilitarian bowls, an indigenous form of rustic earthenware. Eventually they became more artistic, adding animal features and creating a line of local pottery that was not only functional, but also had a certain charm to it. It's a style that has continued pretty much unchanged for several hundred years and the lineage now resides in the hands of Doña Ramona, the patron saint and one of the last of the mountain potters of her generation. It's a craft she is trying to teach younger folks, before it disappears completely. These mountain artisans had

led a quiet existence well off the beaten path until Paula Colombo from Café Santa Fe in Todos Santos went up in the hill more than twenty years ago looking for those indigenous cooking vessels and discovered the source.

The village we're approaching is called San Vicente, a scattered community of less than fifty hardy souls who eke a living out of the sparse mountain environment in a range of the Sierra de la Laguna just south of Todos Santos. Sergio, through his company Todos Santos Eco Adventures, runs small groups of mountain potter *aficionados* up the road to visit with Doña Ramona, who lives a very simple but satisfying life far away from all of the local land speculation and touristy T-shirt shops.

The trip takes about forty-five minutes, and along the way we're treated to an overview of the local lifestyle and environment, as Sergio spins the wheel while commenting on the area's history and local flora and fauna. We also learn that for many families in the area, including

the sons and daughters of Doña Ramona, most of the younger generation have left the mountains to seek employment and excitement in the bright lights of Cabo and the surrounding area.

Finally, towards the top of the mountain a small sign announces "Artesiana de Barro Ramona," an indication we've reached our destination. We pull into the *ranchito*, a loosely assembled group of buildings centered around a small house and covered outdoor cooking area, the home and business headquarters for Doña Ramona's Mountain Pottery.

Doña Ramona and her husband greet us. She's the living image of everyone's favorite grandmother, radiant and dressed simply in a full length apron, her graying hair pulled back into a bun.

Under the covered area - her outdoor kitchen - there's a stove literally carved in stone, her main workstation, and an assortment of cooking utensils, household items, and a collection of other utilitarian odds and ends. It all looks very primitive,

something you would expect to see at an exhibit of early pioneering amenities, a Native American cooking station that's been hewn out of the landscape.

"The stove was the first thing that they built here," explains Sergio. "When they finished that then they constructed the house." We can see that the stove is well used, with wood coals and kindling remaining from the previous meal. There's a residual smell of the wood smoke which has seasoned the area, and we're anxious to see the stone grill in action, home cooking over a wood fire at its best.

But it seems there's a little initiation ceremony we have to pass before they stoke up the midday meal. That's right, it's time for

(FAR LEFT AND BELOW) | *The road to Doña Ramona's home in the Sierra de la Giganta Mountains is rough and windy, but the guide, Sergio, promises that it's safe, so long as off-road racers aren't around. Writer Mike Koehn and Joan Papanek mold local clay into animal-shaped pottery, under the tutelage of Doña.*

us to summon up our inner ceramist and try to create something from clay, a functional piece of pottery in the shape of a pig.

Looking around we see attempts by previous visitors, creatively different but with characteristic stumpy legs, cloven hooves and cartilaginous snouts. Some are more anatomically correct, some less so, but all seem essentially connected to the pig family.

And that's the challenge. Dig into a pile of dirt, add water and try to come up with something that resembles a barnyard animal. Doña Ramona sits with us at a small work table and Sergio translates as she explains how they create the pottery. She tells us she learned pottery from her mother and grandmother and shows us the wooden tools she uses, the same ancestral tools that have been used to make pottery for hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

The process begins with sourcing the specific clay soil that they use for the pottery, which is brought to the *ranchito* area and stored. Water is added to a supply on hand, and Joan and I are invited to start the

process, mucking up the soil until it forms a ball, forming the mud into something the size of a softball, trying to create a torso for the pig, hollowing it out so it might serve as a cooking vessel.

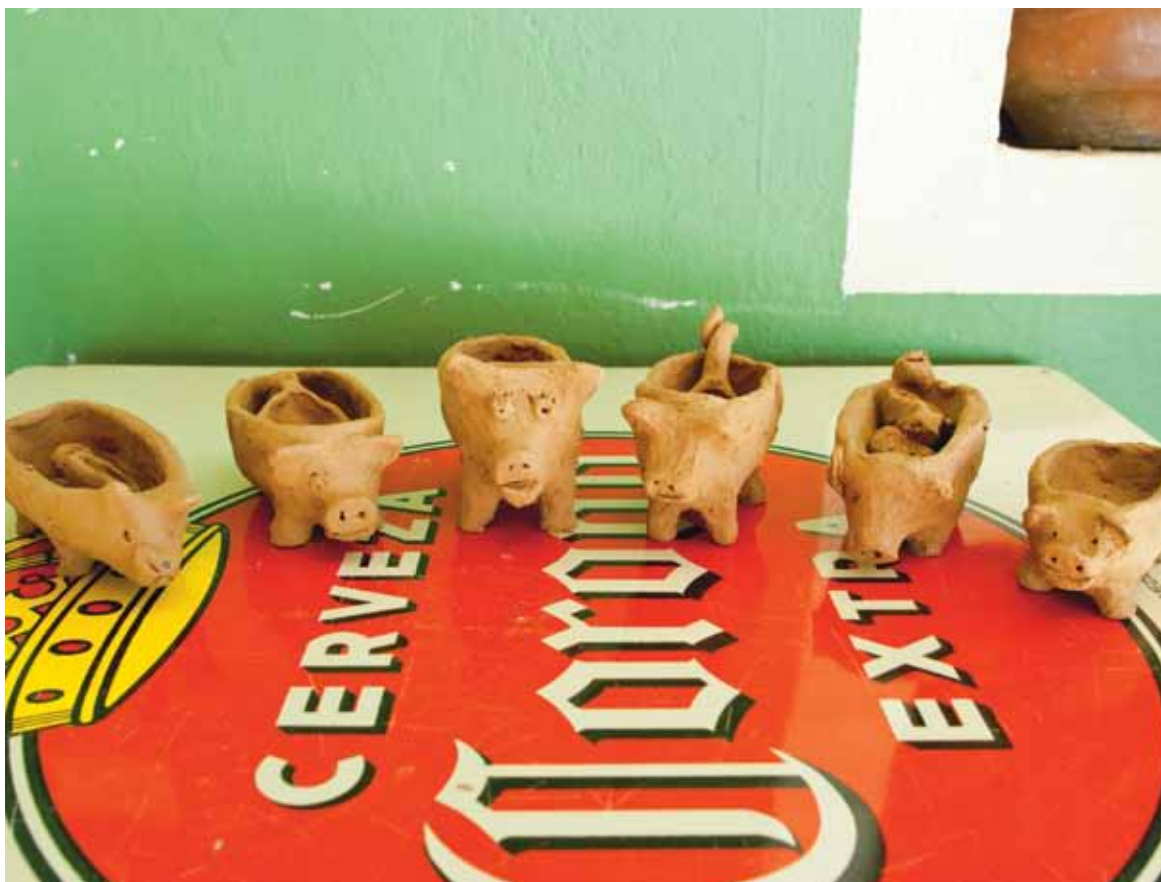
Before long our animals take shape. They're still a far cry from the pig that Ramona is working on, and the consensus is that mine is shaped like a rat. "Don't quit your day job," Paul advises, and he's right. This pottery thing is messy and doesn't come easily.

Finally Joan and I complete our porky abstracts, animals on some mutated offshoot of the porcine family tree. We've worked diligently on them for the last twenty minutes, and now we're hungry.

Our timing is good. Luckily it's lunchtime and the second part of the tour includes learning to make tortillas by hand, and cooking them over the wood burning stove. This has to be easier.

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(ABOVE, BELOW AND FAR RIGHT) | With the greenware of Doña and her students finally in shape, it's time to let it dry. The home is already filled with plenty of other pieces that have already been fired. Doña then teaches her students how to prepare tortillas for lunch, which she does with as much expertise as she has with ceramics. The end results are tantalizing. Doña Ramona is quite happy running her pottery studio and ranchita with her husband.

We move over to the cooking area where Ramona's husband Marcos has stoked up some dead tree limbs into a flickering fire and glowing bed of coals.

Doña Ramona has the masa prepared, rolled into balls slightly larger than a walnut, which she then flattens on a tortilla press and tosses back and forth between her hands, enlarging the tortilla with each toss by gently spreading her hands.

Then it's on to the frying surface, a well-used flat metal disc suspended above the open flame, where the flat circle of dough begins to puff up and bubble. Doña Ramona rotates and presses the quickly-cooking tortilla on the grill, and it's done.

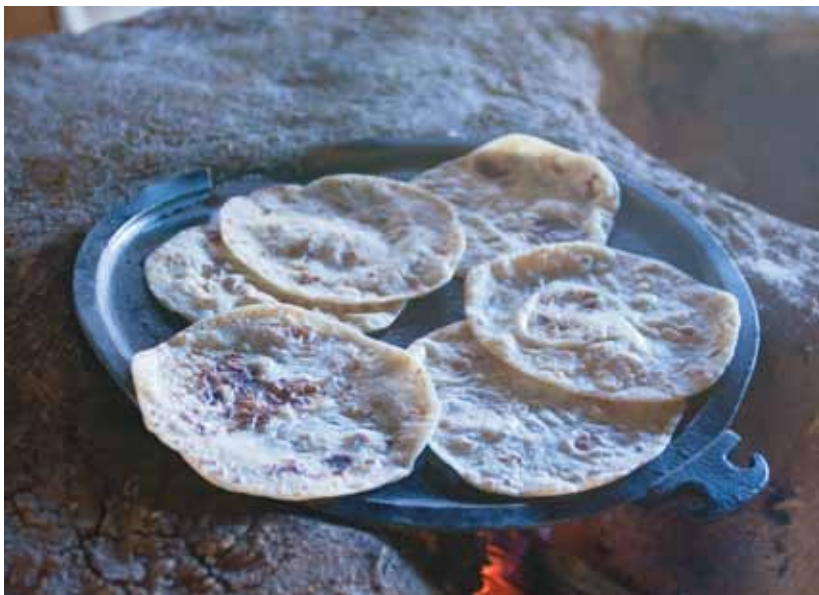
Now it's our turn, but the results aren't so smooth, our tortillas quickly turning into misshapen dough, uneven in their thickness, with holes and other major imperfections. Paul manages a tortilla of even thickness, but it comes out square, an innovative new taste treat that "looks like Kansas," according to guide Sergio.

No matter the shape, we eat them hot off the grill, toasty and delicious in the way only a fresh tortilla can be, a little too hot for comfort but we stuff them into our mouths anyway.

Our tortillas are gone, but Doña Ramona has cooked up a nice fresh, properly-shaped supply and we're invited to a lunch consisting of those warm puffy launch pads, some *machaca* from the *ranchito*, refried beans, and a homemade tomatillo salsa. It's all served with a sweet and tangy *auga de tamarindo* drink that is a perfect accompaniment.

We go through the food quickly, and I think to myself that this has been one of the best meals I've had anywhere. Maybe it's the remote location, the clear mountain air, or the approximation of the campfire cooking and the company. But it's really the complete environment and the closeness to the source that makes this such an enjoyable experience. The simply crafted, homemade food is so flavorful, so texturally satisfying with the creaminess of the beans, the chewy tortilla





and the intensely flavored *machaca*, that would be hard to surpass at any commercial restaurant. This is the type of meal, in its rustic simplicity, which a lot of restaurants and their *muy autentico* approach attempt to capture.

Completely satisfied and under the watchful eye of our host, we finish the meal, lingering a little to enjoy the moment. Our pottery efforts may have come up a little short, but we have no problem appreciating the cultural creations of Café Doña Ramona.

Finally, it's time to head back, away from this attractively simple lifestyle and down

the mountain to Pescadero and Todos Santos and the restless development that is moving up the expanded corridor from Cabo to points north, the Pacific beach towns and La Paz. The solace is that we have a rendezvous at the Hotel California and Executive Chef Dany Lamote, who is well-known for his regional Baja cuisine at the hotel's La Coronela restaurant. It's a natural connection, as Sergio and Dany work together on a Baja cooking tour, which is based on indigenous seafood and ingredients like cactus, wild honey and avocados, and includes a visit with Doña Ramona.

With one solid lesson under our belt we feel we have a good start on that class, and look forward to maybe working on an advanced degree with Chef Lamote. We're told he's creating some wonderfully creative cuisine, and also makes a margarita with flor de jamaica and jalapeno nectars that is out of this world.

For more information:
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El Fin!