

Pot — Asuq

IQALLUT NASQUAT ASUMI KALLAUT. – THE FISH HEADS ARE BOILING IN THE POT.



Photo: Linda Mullen popping corn, Port Wakefield, Raspberry Island. Juney Mullen Collection.

Eighteenth-century fur traders in the Kodiak region noted that Alutiiq people made and used ceramic pots for baking, cooking meat, and melting blubber. Although this pottery has not been produced in more than two centuries, archaeological data illustrate that it was expertly made. Pieces of these pots also provide clues to their manufacture.

Alutiiq people fashioned pots from local glacial clays mixed with sand and gravel. A few early pots also show the use of grass as a tempering agent. Most were quite large, up to a foot in diameter and big enough to hold several gallons of liquid, although people also fashioned tiny toy pots. Alutiiq people created two shapes of pots, tall conical pots with a flat base, and another style with a more rounded base.

To start a pot, a craftsman formed the base with a round disc of clay. To this, he or she added strips of tempered clay, winding them around the base. Craftsmen used small paddles to blend the strips of clay as they formed the walls of the pot. Many pots were cone-shaped at the base and then straightened at a distinct shoulder to form a cylinder at the top. A decorative collar might be added to the opening of the pot, and its surface smoothed with a wash of clay and burnished. Craftsmen probably hardened their pots by placing them in fires.

It is likely that Kodiak Islanders learned to make ceramics from their neighbors on the Alaska Peninsula, who produced pots for more than a thousand years before the technology was adopted in the Gulf of Alaska. Ceramic pots appear in Kodiak's archaeological record at about eight hundred years ago. They are most common in settlements of the islands' southeastern and southwestern coast. The mouths of these vessels are typically coated with a thick, black crust, which may be carbonized grease.