

Asut – CERAMICS



Clay forms as the Earth's surface weathers, breaking rocks into smaller and smaller pieces. During the last glacial epoch, weathering of Kodiak's slate and granite core created distinctive deposits of blue-gray clay. This clay is widely available around Kodiak and Alutiiq/Sugpiaq ancestors harvested it to make tools.

Alutiiq ancestors used local clay to line pits for cooking and storing food for thousands of years. Many sod houses had clay-lined depressions set into the floor beside the hearth. By about 500 years ago, Alutiiq people also began making sturdy, cylindrical pots. Most were quite large, measuring up to a foot in diameter and capable of holding several gallons of liquid. Kodiak residents may have learned about pottery from their neighbors on the Alaska Peninsula, whose use of pottery dates back about 2100 years.



Clay cooking pot from Rolling Bay, Laughlin Collection, courtesy of the Kodiak Area Native Association, AM50:13. Photo by Pam Foreman.

To build a pot, craftspeople mixed glacial clay with sand and gravel and then formed a round disc of clay for the base. Next, they added strips of clay, coiling them around the base. People probably used small paddles to blend the strips of clay as they formed the walls of a pot. Sometimes a decorative collar was added to the rim of the pot, and its surface smoothed with a wash of clay. The final step was to harden the pot. Pots were likely air-dried and then placed in a fire.

How were these pots used? Charred food remains provide some clues. Studies of the black crusty material stuck to the inside of many pots revealed evidence salmon and sea mammal fat. Some pots were used to cook meals. Others were used to melt blubber into oil. The creation of pottery coincides with evidence of more intensive whaling.

LEARN MORE:

The adoption of pottery on Kodiak Island: Insights from organic residue analysis, 2020, by Marjolein Admiraal, Alexandre Lucquin, Matthew von Tersch, Oliver E. Craig, and Peter D. Jordan, *Quaternary International*, 554:128-142.