**Kiln-cooked turkeys a Thanksgiving tradition at UAF**

By Jeff Richardson

Jim Brashear has vivid memories of his first Thanksgiving at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. He was living alone in a faculty housing unit and looking for a place to cook a turkey.

The ceramics professor figured he’d try something different, inspired by an old Chinese cooking technique. Brashear encased a turkey in clay, tossed it in one of the kilns in the ceramics studio, and hoped for the best.

“Lo and behold, it worked,” Brashear said with a smile. “It was pretty good right off the bat, so that started a tradition.”

Since that experiment in 1992, Brashear and his students have celebrated each Thanksgiving by preparing kiln-cooked turkeys. The birds are the centerpiece of a meal for students and others who can’t make it home for Thanksgiving, with 100 or more people packing the studio for a potluck-style feast.

For many at UAF, it’s become a novel way to kick off the holiday, with everyone from chancellors to new students dropping by through the years.

Brashear led a half-dozen students on Wednesday morning who worked to prepare four birds, filling them with a mixture of oranges, apples, onions and cubed butter before wrapping them in foil, clay and wet newspaper. The technique creates a sealed environment around the turkey, keeping it moist and tender as it cooks in the kiln.

The idea of cooking in a ceramics studio, surrounded by half-finished bowls and sculptures, initially felt a little odd to UAF student Wendy Connelley. But after sampling some of Brashear’s tasty turkey four years ago, she became a believer. She has made the meal an annual tradition for her family ever since.

“The first time, the thought of cooking it here was off,” Connelley said as she chopped garlic. “Now that I’ve been working with ceramics a while, I think of it like a big toaster oven.”

Brashear said he’s learned a few lessons to improve the process. A layer of wet newspapers over the clay keeps the coating from cracking. Digital thermometers have also helped — before they were installed on the kilns he’d toss pieces of paper inside, knowing the temperature had hit 420 degrees when the paper burned.

Brashear has also come up with a good stuffing, after a few glitches. Traditional bread stuffing made the cook time go too slowly, so he dropped it. While bargain-hunting a few years ago, he decided to substitute grapefruit for oranges, which isn’t a trade he’ll be making again.

But through the decades, participants said, the companionship as much as the food keeps bringing them back.

“This is fun,” said ceramics student Steve Keller as he rolled out a large clay oval. “Everybody knows everybody, and when new people come we welcome them into it.”

*Jeff Richardson is a public information officer at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. He can be reached at* [*jarichardson@alaska.edu*](mailto:jarichardson@alaska.edu) *or 907-474-6284.*

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*UAF photo by Todd Paris  
University of Alaska Fairbanks ceramics professor Jim Brashear prepares a turkey for cooking at the UAF ceramics studio.*

*UAF photo by JR Ancheta  
Turkeys encased in clay are prepared for cooking inside a kiln at the University of Alaska Fairbanks ceramics studio.*

*UAF photo by Todd Paris  
A turkey is prepared for cooking by coating it with newspaper and clay at the University of Alaska Fairbanks ceramics studio.*