

What's a Raku Glaze?

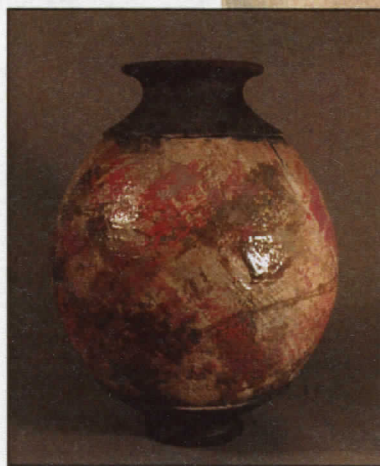
RAKU GLAZES

In my workshops, I get asked many questions but never “What is a raku glaze?” Why? Because everyone knows what a raku glaze is. Right? It’s a glaze that is labeled “raku.” Wrong. It’s time to expand your thinking and understand exactly what this whole raku glaze thing is about.

A raku glaze is any glaze you use in the raku method. It doesn’t have to be a glaze specifically designed for raku, formulated to fire at the temperature you fire your raku to, nor homemade or commercial. It can be most anything. The key to success is understanding the raku firing process and the ability to predict how a particular glaze reacts to that process.

The Raku Method

Raku as practiced in the West is a low-fire method in which we quickly heat the ware, remove the ware from the kiln when the glaze has melted, and perform some type of post-firing process to the piece. The post-firing phase is usually an immersion in an organic combustible material to affect the final outcome on the glaze and the raw clay. Deciding when the glaze has melted takes practice and is best done by observation, though many potters use pyrometers to aid in making that decision. Raku is exciting, often unpredictable to the novice and fun to do.



Brushed stoneware glaze under clear raku glaze.

Glaze Application

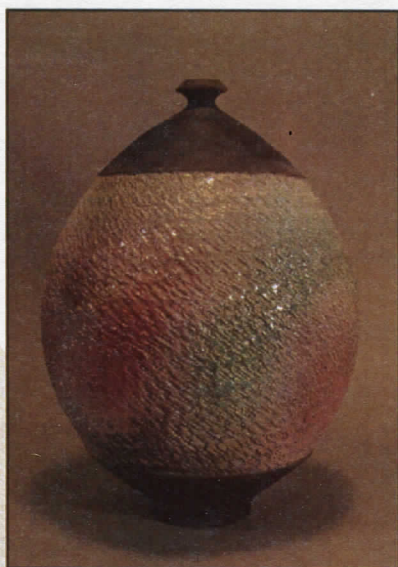
Glazing work for raku can be done by all the methods known—dipping, pouring, brushing, spraying, splashing, dripping, sponging—you name it. Glazes also can be used alone or in combination. Keep in mind that the application of a glaze has a direct effect on the result.

Dedicated Raku Glazes

Glazes specifically designed for raku fall into two categories—homemade and commercially prepared. If you mix your own, you’ll find scores of recipes. Search the internet, ask friends, look in any book on glazes or raku and look in magazines. In no time you will find more glazes than you could use in a lifetime. Of course, to mix your own glazes you must have a stock of materials, mixing paraphernalia, knowledge and interest. If this doesn’t turn you on there are myriad manufacturers that produce almost as many raku glazes. The advantage of using commercial glazes is that you are given instruction on how to use the glaze, you have a sample of the fired glaze to help guide your results, and the formulation (although not the results!) will be consistent time after time. Of course, commercial glazes are a bit more expensive than mixing your own, and by using commercial glazes you are removing what is for some, the most interesting part of the raku process: designing and using your own glazes.

Low-Fire Glazes

Glazes used in the raku process need not be “raku” glazes at all. At its core, raku is a low-temperature fir-



Sprayed stoneware glaze under clear raku glaze.

ing method. The fact that we remove the ware from the kiln while the pots are hot and the glaze is molten is irrelevant.

Understanding this opens up a whole new world of glazes. Any glaze that is formulated to fire at the low temperature of raku can be used. First, you must decide at what temperature you are firing. Most raku is done in the Cone 010–06 range. Begin by choosing glazes that both appeal to you in color and that fire in your range. You will have to experiment but I have never found a glaze that I couldn't use successfully.



Multilayered brushed commercial low-fire glazes.

High-Fire Glazes

We are not limited only to glazes that melt at the low temperatures. With greater understanding of the raku process, even mid-range and high-fire glazes can be used in the low-temperature range of raku. Try using your regular stoneware glazes as slips. Over the glaze, apply a clear or white raku or other low-temperature glaze. The low-temperature glaze causes the high-fire glaze to melt giving you a new palette of colors to work with.

Other Glazes

In addition to glazes, slips, engobes, underglazes, overglazes, china paints, underglaze pencils, oxides and stains are all viable in the raku process.

Food Safety

No matter what type of glaze or decorative material you use, raku is

inherently unsafe for use as domestic ware. The rapid firing, removal of the ware and subsequent post-firing phase all contribute to fragility, porosity, and thin, easily flaked glaze surfaces. Not all materials used in raku glazes are toxic. In fact, most are not. Confusion arises when you realize that over the centuries some of the most prized

teabowls by tea masters have been raku fired. Be safe, and think of your raku ware as decorative and not functional.

Steven Brantfman is founder and director of the Potters Shop and School in Needham, MA, a workspace, school, gallery, bookstore and his studio. He is also the author of Raku: A Practical Approach (kp books).