

# Mexican village's pottery a clay gem

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STAFF WRITER

Claire Willis decided to take a short vacation to Mexico. But as it turned out, the small village of Mata Ortiz had much more to offer her than a two-week trip would allow.

Living for five weeks in the northern Mexican town of 1,200 in the state of Chihuahua, Willis found herself amid a great story of Mexican art — one with a beginning, no middle and a future.

Mata Ortiz pottery originated in the city of Paquime, which flourished in the 13th century. The city and its intricate pottery disappeared, only to be rediscovered and reinvented by Juan Quezada about 40



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## If you go

**What:** Mata Ortiz pottery demonstrations.

**When:** 7-9 p.m. Friday and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday.

**Where:** Friday: Genesee Pottery, 713 Monroe Ave.; Saturday: Rochester Folk Art Guild, 1445 Upper Hill Road, Middlesex.

**Cost:** Friday: \$5 donation requested for artists' travel costs; Saturday: \$25 donation requested. Lunch can be bought for \$8.

**Contact:** Genesee Pottery at (585) 271-5183 or Rochester Folk Art Guild at (585) 554-3539.

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years ago.

Willis, a 23-year-old potter at the Rochester Folk Art Guild, is accustomed to

# Pottery

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making functional pots — ones that take her an hour on average to make. But the process perfected by Quezada can take weeks to finish.

"I'm used to such a different process," said Willis, of Middlesex, Yates County. "I learned how to embrace a whole different way of doing things."

From collecting the clay to using a paintbrush made of five human hairs, Mata Ortiz pots are made completely by hand.

"One of the unique things about it is that they dig up all of their clay in the mountains," Willis said.

"It's all based on what they have right there."

Without using a wheel, potters spend hours smoothing the surface of the hand-formed pots with four different types of sandpaper and whatever tool is available, from the edge of a hacksaw to a broken CD.

Each morning, Willis awoke

to find herself engulfed in a new part of this Mexican potter culture. The town, in which no less than 600 people are involved in the making of the pottery, has shifted away from its agricultural past.

"The economy is dependent on the pottery at this point," Willis said.

In 1976, anthropologist Spencer MacCallum discovered a Mata Ortiz pot in a small shop in New Mexico. Recognizing that this particular piece of art was in no way ordinary, he tracked down its maker, Quezada, thus beginning a partnership that put Mata Ortiz on the map and made the pots internationally known.

Today, the pots sell in the United States for double their price in Mexico, which often ends up being between \$200 and \$300. An original Juan Quezada may be sold for up to \$10,000.

In Mata Ortiz, most families have at least one potter among them. Often the entire family has been trained in the art and each member is assigned a different step in the process, creating an assembly line of sorts.

Watching at first, Willis slowly immersed herself in the process. By trip's end, she was confident enough to make her own creations. Along with her newly acquired skills of speaking Spanish and throwing a laso, Willis brought back to Rochester the art of Mata Ortiz.

Genesee Pottery and the Rochester Folk Art Guild are coming together to host Willis and four Mata Ortiz natives this weekend. Monico Corona, Ismael Flores, Maria Loya and Ana Trillo will teach about their pottery and give a demonstration at Genesee Pottery on Friday evening, as well as a full-day demonstration at Rochester Folk Art Guild on Saturday. Willis will also be speaking and showing video footage from her trip on Friday.

"It's a bit of a cultural exchange," said Joe Fastaia, director of Genesee Pottery and a Rochester resident. "Usually when we have events here it's of known artists in the Rochester region, and this is a bit more rare." □

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