

# SOAP DISH WITH A CATCH

by Shana Salaff

One of the wonderful things about making functional pottery is that the creative work of my hands becomes an intimate part of someone else's daily life—what a joy! I also see one of my roles as a potter as providing a service to the community. In creating useful objects, I am helping in my own way.

As I write, it is mid-December 2020, and the COVID-19 pandemic is at its worst thus far. This article will arrive in print in early 2021, and I can only hope that things have improved by then. One of the ways we can work together to combat the spread of this coronavirus is to wash our hands frequently. As the FDA states on their website, "Wash your hands with plain soap and water. That's still one of the most important steps you can take to avoid getting sick and to prevent spreading germs." Therefore, I

have chosen to create soap dishes as an opportunity to help out. I've designed them so that they are both lovely to look at and effective at keeping the soap dry.

To make the drainage area visually interesting, I thought of the satisfying feeling of creating a spiral in a flat pad of clay on the wheel. It occurred to me that I could cut out along the spiral lines, then add sides, feet, and handles to this cut-out base to create the soap dish. These dishes have developed an animated look because of their feet and their arm-like handles and I really enjoy that effect. In a way, the soap holder becomes a member of the household, containing as well as offering the potentially lifesaving bar of soap. The soap dish is accompanied by a small tray underneath to catch water in order to keep the soap dry and the sink area clean.



Shana Salaff's soap dish with catch tray, 5½ in. (14 cm) in length, wheel-thrown porcelain stoneware, fired to cone 5 in oxidation, 2020.

**Note:** Although the instructions here are for one dish and tray, I find it more efficient to make several at once. The ring used to make the handles is enough for at least four trays. Additionally, making a number of dishes and trays means that it is easier to find sets that work together. There are many different steps that require the clay to set up overnight, so I've divided the tasks into workdays.

### Day One

Center  $\frac{1}{4}$  of a pound of a smooth white clay body into a  $5\frac{1}{2}$ –6 inch-wide disk by using the side of one hand to slowly flatten the base while the other hand keeps it centered. Press your index finger down into the base and draw outward as the wheel turns to create a spiral (1). After releasing the thrown slab with the spiral from the bat using a wire tool, pick the base up gently from the side, then repeatedly stretch it by dragging the base toward one side on canvas (2). Cover the resulting oval slab lightly and set aside to firm up overnight.

Center  $\frac{3}{8}$  of a pound of clay and open down to the bat. Carefully compress and stretch into a ring measuring  $5\frac{1}{2}$  inches wide, using a sponge between your thumb and first two fingers. Pull the walls to about 1 inch in height. Tidy up both sides of the thrown ring with a wooden tool and then use a knife to cut it off the bat with the wheel turning slowly (3). After letting the ring firm up slightly, shape it into an oval, cover it with plastic, and set it aside overnight.

### Day Two

The next day, uncover both the ring and the base. Make sure they are at a similar firmness. Cut out the recessed spiral area from the base to create a drainage area, keeping small tabs in place for support (4). Compress the cut corners using a small wooden tool.

Score and add slip to the bottom rim of the ring (I use a very thick slip made from my clay body with CMC gum added to increase stickiness), then place it onto the base in order to leave a slip footprint. Remove the ring and rest it on its top rim. If any of the areas on the base within the footprint are part of the thrown spiral, attach small pieces of fresh clay to level them with the surface of the slab. Score and add enough slip to the spiral edge so that it will ooze out after the pieces are attached. Add more slip to the bottom of the ring and attach it to the base. Clean up and compress the joins using a sponge-covered finger (5).

To make the feet, start with a ball of clay about the size of a small lime. Divide the ball into four equal parts. Roll each part into a ball, and then roll the ball into a carrot-shaped coil. Flatten the thick ends by tapping them on the table. Roll the thin end around a bit to round it. Shape each foot into a small arc (6). Compress the inside of the arc with your finger.

Next, create a support pad for the base from a flattened lump of clay. Make it thick enough that it is level with the top rim when placed inside the dish. Use a piece of paper to keep the pad from sticking to the inside of the base (7). Let the separate components—body of the dish, feet, and support pad—set up together overnight, covered with a thin sheet of plastic.

### Day Three

Using a rasp followed by a flexible rib, even out the exterior of the base, then use a sponge to clean the surface. Rest the body of the dish upside down on the support. After first ensuring that the feet are level, firmly attach them to the bottom as far apart from each other as you can. (8) This will determine the size of



1 Draw your finger outward as the wheel turns to create a spiral in the base.



2 Oval the base by stretching it repeatedly to one side.



3 Throw a bottomless ring with short walls, then cut it off the wheel.



4 Cut out the spiral with an X-Acto knife, leaving small connector tabs.



5 With a sponge and your fingers, compress and clean the edge of the base.



6 Make feet by forming a carrot-shaped coil into a curve.



7 Create a support pad and use a stick tool to check its height.



8 Attach the feet to the supported base using thick slip and firm pressure.



9 Once the handles are cut, create an oval shape by curving them gently.



10 Attach the handles to the side of the dish, again using thick slip and firm pressure.



11 Throw then oval the drip tray by shaping it with the sides of your hands.



Finished soap dish with catch tray, fired to cone 5 in oxidation.

the drainage dish. Clean up the attached feet with a sponge. Dry the form upside down on the support pad overnight.

For the handle, center a  $\frac{3}{8}$ -pound ball of clay and stretch it into a bottomless ring about 10 inches wide. Pull walls up to about  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch tall. Clean up the inside and outside of the ring using a wooden knife tool. Cut the handle ring from the bat and set it aside until it is no longer tacky. Next, cut the ring into equal pieces about 2 inches in length each. Coax each of the cut pieces into matching curved shapes with your fingers (9). Divide the handles into pairs and let them firm up overnight.

### Day Four

Compress and refine the area around each foot with a wooden rib tool. Reshape the support pad so that it now fits in the space beneath the base and inside the feet. This is a good time to measure the length and width of the interior of the feet. Cut out the small support tabs in the drainage spiral with an X-Acto knife, using your hand to support the base as you do this. After cleaning the area up with a wooden knife tool and sponge, place the dish on the support pad. **Tip:** Keep the piece on the support pad from this point onward and through the bisque firing, otherwise the spiral will droop.

Work a small arch into the bottom of the handles with your finger so that they fit neatly onto the top of the ring. Score and slip both connection areas and attach (10). Clean up any excess slip with a sponge, and let the piece set up lightly covered in plastic overnight.

Add together the length and width measurements you made of the space in between the feet and divide by two. This will be

the approximate size of the exterior diameter of the tray. Throw  $\frac{3}{8}$  of a pound of clay into a small flat dish with low sides (about  $\frac{1}{2}$ – $\frac{3}{4}$  inch tall) and a  $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-thick bottom. Use a wire tool to release the tray from the wheel head and set it aside until it's no longer tacky. Using the sides of your hands, shape the tray into a soft rectangle (11). After setting it aside again until just stiff, position the tray under the soap dish to check the fit. The tray should be soft enough to manipulate or shave into shape if the fit is off a bit. Cover both the tray and the base overnight.

### Day Five

Clean up the soap dish and tray with a sponge one last time so that everything looks clean. Check that the feet are level; if not, gently abrade them on a flat surface with a small amount of water. Cover and dry slowly over a few weeks.

When the soap dish is fully dry, check again that the feet are level and gently sand them if not. Bisque fire both pieces separately with the support pad placed under the spiral in the base.

Brush a different glaze onto each part of the bisque-fired soap dish and tray to accentuate the separate elements. Leave the feet unglazed. Use a shiny glaze on the interior of both the dish and tray for cleanliness and to accentuate the spiral.

Choose a bar of soap that matches or contrasts your glaze choices. Your dish can now play its part in making your frequent hand-washing habit more enjoyable. What fun to make a soap dish that becomes a member of the family!

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