

## Pottery Island

In the hilltop homes and tiny beach towns of Sifnos, Greek potters carry on family traditions

BY VERA MARIE BADERTSCHER



Stone steps climb the steep hills covered with little white houses. Sifnos housewives outline the flagstones on the narrow paths and sketch daisies with whitewash. Scarlet geraniums and electric purple bougainvillea cascade from a tall, ridged pot once used for olive oil. Another stately vessel stands sentinel at a doorway,

with a bright silk scarf tied around its neck.

Famous for excellent chefs, classic Cycladic architecture and a profusion of churches, the Greek island of Sifnos also answers to “Island of Potters.” At one time, every kitchen in the Aegean depended on heat-resistant cooking pots from Sifnos, shaped from the special siliceous clay

soil of the island. The popularity of this rough earthenware, *keramika*, peaked in the 18th century, but as gas and electric replaced the aroma of wood smoke in kitchens, aluminum pans pushed aside clay pots.

The new millennium has seen a resurgence of interest in traditional crafts and culinary techniques, fueling the resurgence of Sifnos *keramika*. The work is quite affordable, usually ranging from 5 Euros for a small plate or bowl to 150 Euros for a large, complex piece. Since craftsmen generally sell their wares only in their own shops, browsing for plates and bowls provides a good excuse to explore the laid-back island.

In the beach town of Vathy, a steep nail-biting dirt track leads down to a cluster of historic white buildings where Antonis Atsonios and his son Giannis work a stone’s throw from the bay. Only five other island workshops can trace a dedication to pottery back five generations.

Like other traditional area potters, Antonis collects his own clay, testing its plasticity and cohesion by squeezing a clump between his fingers. Giannis coils strips of the sifted, soaked and sun-dried



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clay into rough rounds. He then smooths them into pots and bowls on an electric-powered pottery wheel. Once outside, Antonis tells the story of when electricity came to Vathy in the 1960s. Grinning, he kicks off a sandal and demonstrates the wobbly wooden foot-powered wheel used by *papous mou* (my grandfather), its structure changed little from the Greek Archaic period (625–500 B.C.).

In a whitewashed building the size of a one-room house, the potter points out two doorways closed off

by stacks of pottery cemented in with clay. A pit starts in front of the building and extends under the wall, heating the house-sized kiln with a wood fire.

Out of this kiln comes red-brown cookware like Antonis’s grandfather made—*mastelno* (a soup pot), *tsoukali* (a casserole dish) and *youvetsi* (a stew pot)—but also modern, colorfully glazed mugs, bowls, plates and platters. Because of changing demand from buyers, only about 20 percent of the Atsonioses’ current output fits the definition of “traditional,” although many modern pieces clearly evolved from old forms. A *flaros*, which former generations used to catch embers in a chimney, now serves as a patio light.

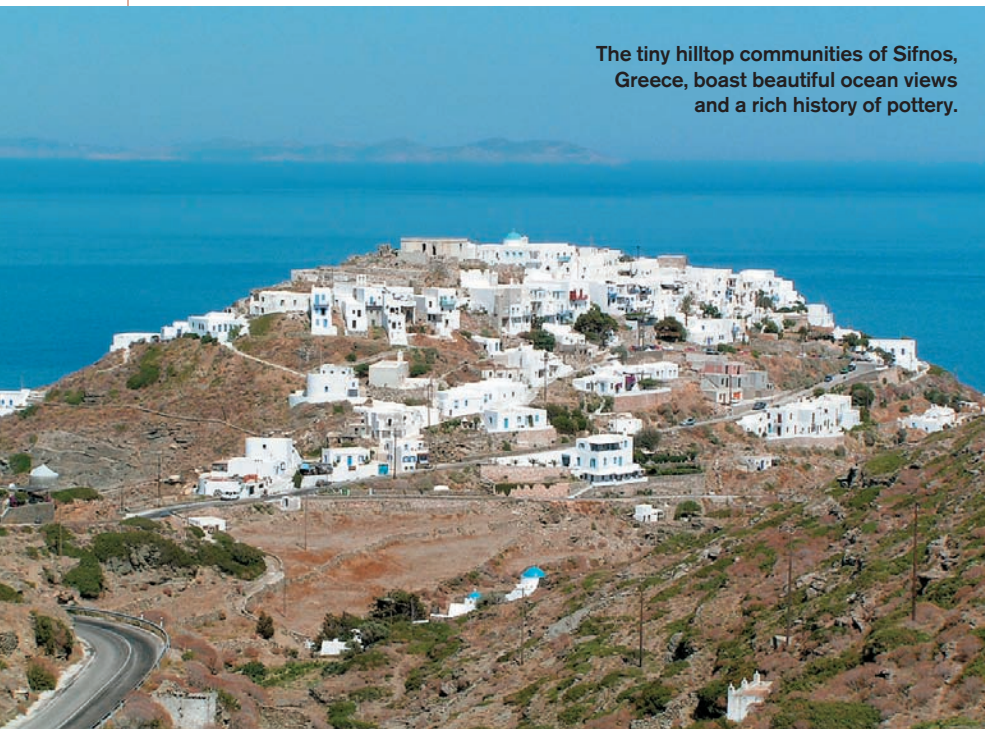
Around the gentle curve of Vathy beach, two sisters work to establish some traditions of their own. Maria and Flora Markou took up a mostly male profession.



A sign for the Atsonios pottery studio will guide you in the right direction, opposite. An abstract vase on the top shelf in their workshop was inspired by a stack of traditional pots, left. Outside, the door to the Atsonioses’ house-sized kiln is sealed off by old pots and clay. Antonis Atsonios demonstrates his grandfather’s foot-powered wheel, below.



The tiny hilltop communities of Sifnos, Greece, boast beautiful ocean views and a rich history of pottery.



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Maria Markou, shown above in her Vathy workshop, studied under renowned Sifnos potter Kostas Depastas, whose work is shown at right.



They studied with Sifnos's preeminent potter, Kostas Depastas, whose primitive workshop sits next to one of the two seaside taverns in the tiny town of Cheronissos. People come from many countries to study with the old master.

The Markou sisters use imported clay to produce non-functional pieces like a playful yellow sun plaque, or tiles adorned with Minoan boys.

Flora says that although they make a few old designs, "We want to make some things that are only our ideas." Their interpretation of the ancient *flaros* is a deep-blue, egg-shaped candle cover.

Flora stresses that they keep the designs simple, as did the historic craftsmen who adorned their pottery with only a few white loops, like those pavement daisies. "We use natural colors in the glaze. And usually only one color because that helps you see the form," she says.

The hope is that the traditional techniques that make Sifnos *keramika* so special will continue to live on, even as the potters adapt to modern times. When asked if he is concerned that younger craftspeople will stop making the traditional earthenware, Antonis Atsonios shrugs and smiles. "If people like it," he says, "they will make it." ●

**VERA MARIE BADERTSCHER**, a freelance writer from Tucson, Ariz., travels frequently to write about the arts, among other topics.

**IF YOU GO**

**S**ifnos (also spelled Siphnos) is in the center of the Cyclades islands, south of Athens. Ferry schedules vary according to the time of year, but a high-speed boat takes about three hours from Piraeus (the port of Athens) to Kamareas, the main port of Sifnos. Travelers get around Sifnos by rental car or via the bus system. Taxis are also available at the port. The hot months of July and August are high tourist season, with more frequent buses and ferries, along with more people. In the months of March through June and in September and October, you will find fewer crowds and lovely weather.

Potters are spread out throughout the villages in Sifnos. Look for signs that say "keramika." Some even advertise in English as "ceramics" or "pottery."

For more information on Sifnos, visit [www.sifnos.e-sifnos.com](http://www.sifnos.e-sifnos.com), or more general websites like [www.igogreece.com](http://www.igogreece.com), [www.gnto.gr](http://www.gnto.gr) (the Greek National Tourism Organization), or Matt Barrett's [www.greektravel.com](http://www.greektravel.com). —V.M.B.

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