

TAKING THE PLUNGE

by Nancy Gallagher

There are many varied opinions as to the best way to brew a cup of coffee, but for me, the answer will always be a French press. The French press, which ironically was patented by an Italian designer, is a plunger-type brewing system, often using a thin glass carafe, which unfortunately can break entirely too easily. When faced with yet another broken carafe one morning, I decided to make my own ceramic replacement with a matching lid. Now the French press is one of my best selling pots.

Exact Fit

The number one question I'm asked about the French press design is, where do I get the plunger assembly? I ultimately found them at a local restaurant supply store. The size I use is 8½ inches tall × 4 inches wide at the base, which fits a 32-ounce carafe. It comes with a lid, which I discard. Because the size of the pot needs to be exact for the mechanical plunger to fit, I created a template to follow for each form. Before making your own



Nancy Gallagher's ceramic French presses, to 14 in. (36 cm) in height, (holds 32 oz), stoneware, fired to cone 6.



template, you need to know the total shrinkage of your clay body. Mine shrinks 14%, so I use a shrinkage ruler that is just over 14% larger than my fired clay body, to measure the carafe's height and width accurately for fit. I print out a shrinkage ruler from an online source (<https://printable-ruler.net/pottery-shrinkage>) then transfer the markings to the back side of a steel ruler with an indelible marker. For my template, I add 1½ inches to the height of the original carafe to get my carafe's height (9 inches). This accommodates a 1½-inch tall lid, and also gives room on the bottom of the carafe for the coffee grounds. The inside diameter of the carafe needs to be 4 inches, which makes the circumference 12½ inches ($\pi \times \text{diameter}$). This means that the template needs to be 12½ inches in length; however, I need to allow for the clay thickness, so I subtract ½ inch from the length, leaving the final template at 9×12 inches.

Your template can be made from any sturdy and reusable material. I like to use craft foam.

Forming the Carafe

Roll out a ⅜-*inch* slab. That's a thinner slab than I usually use for handbuilding, but I don't want a heavy full pot of coffee. Feel free to add texture or a design to one side of the slab, then carefully compress the blank side of the slab with a rib (or both sides if you left them bare). You should end up with a finished slab that's ¼ *inch* thick. Using your template, cut the rectangle for the body of the carafe (1), hold your knife at an angle on the short side for a bevel cut, then keep your knife at that same angle to cut the other side. This creates an even bevel join for both sides, and a smooth seam. Cut a piece from your leftover clay about 6 inches square to use later for the bottom of your pot; this way, they will both set up at the same time and be the same dryness for attachment.

I like to use heavy cardboard tubes as cylinder molds, and I have luckily found one that is exactly 4 inches in diameter.

When the slab is no longer tacky, but is still quite pliable, score and slip both beveled sides, then wrap it around the cardboard tube (2). Secure the join with a light press of your finger tips, then gently roll over the seam with a pony roller (3). Set the form aside, upright, to stiffen up to a soft leather hard.

Throwing a Lid

While the carafe sections are setting up, throw a lid on the wheel using 10 ounces of clay. Throw a gallery into the base of the lid measuring 4 inches in diameter from outer edge to outer edge (4). Set the lid aside to firm up to leather hard. When it's ready, trim the lid so that the walls are no more than ⅛ *inch* thick. A thin lid is needed to fit the plunger assembly post firing due to the limited length of the hardware. Punch a ¼-*inch* diameter hole into the center of the trimmed, leather-hard lid (5).

Securing the Carafe Seam

When the carafe is a soft leather hard, remove the cardboard tube (6), and reinforce and refine the inside seam. In order for the plunger assembly to work smoothly, it's important that the inside seam be as smooth as possible. If there are any gaps, fill them with thin coils, then compress the filled area with a soft rubber rib.

Shaping the Bottom

Place the bottom slab on a ware board, then place them both on a banding wheel. Score the bottom rim of the carafe, apply slip to the scored areas, then center it onto the bottom slab. Carefully cut around the base of the pot while rotating the banding wheel, leaving a ⅛-*inch* border around the pot (7). Finish this off with a profile rib, again rotating the banding wheel until you have an even, bullnose base all around the pot.

Adding Feet

You may choose to leave the pot flat bottomed, but I like the elevated look and shadow that's cast by raising it up on tripod feet just a bit. Roll out a coil, cut it into three even pieces, then



1 When cutting the template on the short sides, hold the knife at an angle to create an even bevel join and a smooth seam.



2 After scoring and slipping both beveled sides of the template, gently wrap it around the cardboard tube.



3 To ensure a tight fitting seam, gently roll over the outside seam with a pony roller or a soft rib.



4 Throw a gallery into the base of the lid measuring 4 inches in diameter, then cut it off the wheel and let it set up.



5 Once leather hard, punch a ¼-inch diameter hole into the center of your lid using a hole punch or a drill bit.



6 After the cylinder form has stiffened slightly and the seam is sealed, remove the cardboard insert.



7 Cut around the base of the pot while rotating it on a banding wheel, leaving a ⅛-inch border around the pot.



8 With the heel of your hand, gently flatten the coils so they're tapered on either side to become feet.



9 Cut a reverse scoop profile from the outside of each foot with a wire knife for a more pleasing negative shape.



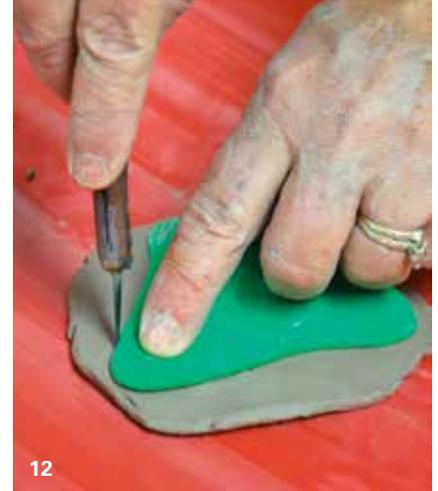
10

Pull handles from one end, then the other, so the finished handle is thicker on each end, similar to a bone shape.



11

Paint an 'L' shape with water onto a ware board to simulate the pot's profile, then cut and shape the handle to fit it.



12

Using a pear-shaped template, cut a spout from a 1/8-inch-thick slab. Texture one side of the slab if you wish.



13

Score and slip the joining edge then add the spout. Use slip made from the same clay body as the form is made from.



14

Shape the spout by thinning out the lip and slightly bending it downward with a wet fingertip.



15

Once each end of the handle is firmly attached, give the top a slight lift with a damp finger to finish it off.



16

The finished greenware French press is now ready to be slowly dried before being bisque fired.

flatten each slightly with the side of your hand (8). Place the pot upside down on a ware board, then mark off three even sections on the bottom outer edge, again scoring and slipping those areas, then attaching the flattened coils and bending them to conform to the circular shape of the bottom edge of the pot. The bases of the feet are pressed evenly into the bottom using a thumb and forefinger while supporting both the interior and the exterior. Smooth and refine the join with a soft rubber rib. I cut a reverse scoop profile from the outside of the feet with a wire knife for a more pleasing negative shape and transition from foot to base (9).

At this point, I keep the pot upside down to let the feet firm up, but place a sheet of plastic under the pot, wrapping the area where the spout will be attached so it doesn't dry out.

Pulling a Handle

While waiting for the feet to firm up, pull a handle. Normally I tend to pull handles off the pot, but for the French press, I pull it separately, let it set up, then attach it. This allows for a thicker area of attachment at both ends, resulting in a strong, but not too heavy handle. Begin by rolling out a coil about as tall as your carafe, with the coil being slightly tapered toward the middle. Flatten the coil a bit and taper the edges as you give it some shape. Pull the coil from one side, then the other, in order to get a dog-bone



17 Insert the short screw from the plunger assembly into the hole from the top of the lid.



18 Holding the plunger-assembly screw in place, flip the lid over and thread the nut onto the screw.



19 Insert the plunger assembly through the bottom of the lid, then add a knob to hold it in place.

shape, with both ends of the attachment thicker than the middle of the handle (10). Next, draw an L shape with water onto a ware board to simulate the pot's profile, and place the handle in that position over the watermark to let it set up. This allows me to see how the handle profile will look on the finished pot and where to cut off the length (11).

Adding a Spout and Attaching the Handle

I cut spouts from a pear-shaped template (12). From an 1/8-inch thick slab, cut the spout shape out and fit it to the carafe almost immediately. Bend it slightly to fit, dip the end in water, then place it in position on the pot. Once it's removed, you can see by the moistened area where the position should be. With a sharp knife, cut out a U shape just inside that water line. Slip and score the edge of that freshly cut area (13), then press the spout firmly into place, shaping and lifting by pushing in the edges gently if needed (14). Secure the join with a coil, then smooth and refine the area.

Once the handle is a soft leather hard, dip each end in water, place it in position on the pot, remove, then score and slip the wet areas that were marked by the handle placement. Firmly press the handle in position and refine the attachment (15, 16).

The Final Touch: A Knob

The last part of the making process is to decide whether you will want to use the knob that comes with the plunger or make your own. I choose to make my own by rolling a rounded tapered coil, then centering a 1/8-inch diameter hole in the bottom once it becomes leather hard. Be sure to cut the bottom off very flat, so it's easier to fire and sits flush against the lip when depressed.

Post Firing Assembly

Once the pots are glaze fired, they do require a bit of post firing assembly to fit the plunger. For the plunger parts that I purchase, the plastic/chrome knobs can be removed with a vise or vise grips and some gentle twisting back and forth until it pops off. Although the hardware may vary depending on the type of plunger assembly you purchase, mine has a threaded post on top of the lid (17) and a nut underneath (18) that are easily removed and transferred to your own thrown lid. The center plunger post can then be inserted into the center hole from the bottom of your thrown lid (19). Lastly, I epoxy the clay knob onto the center post. I use a waterproof putty-type epoxy as it creates a super strong bond, but doesn't drip, so it can be dried

while keeping the assembly vertical.

Although it sounds like a lot of steps, once you have the original template made, the pots are quick to make, and it's fun to vary the designs. Happy brewing!

Nancy Gallagher received her BFA from Kutztown University in Kutztown, Pennsylvania, and further studied functional pottery with Bill van Gilder. She works and teaches at her studio in Seven Valleys, Pennsylvania. To see more of her work, visit <http://gallagherpottery.com>.



French Press Instructions

I always include instructions with my French press pots as there are some who have never used them, or, are buying them as gifts. It's also important to emphasize to the buyer and include in writing, that water is NOT to be boiled in the actual purchased pot.

Your French press will brew up to 32 ounces of coffee. Use 1 tablespoon of course ground coffee for every 4 ounces of water. You may want to increase or decrease this based on your preferred taste, but this is a good start.

In a separate pot, boil the amount of water required for the number of cups of coffee you desire. Place your ground coffee in the press. Remove the water from the heat once it has boiled, wait about 30 seconds, and pour enough into your French press to just cover the grounds. The grounds will swell a bit, then give it a stir. Slowly pour in the rest of the water. Put the lid on but don't press the plunger yet. Wait 4 minutes (average brewing time), then slowly depress the plunger. Serve immediately and enjoy.