

Polymer Clay Basics

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Clay must always be conditioned—no matter how soft. Soft clays can be conditioned by hand or clay dedicated pasta machine easily while the firmer clays need to be hand warmed first before pasta machine conditioning. You can speed this process by slicing 1/8" slices from the block and firmly rolling with an acrylic rod 3-4 times (folding the clay in half between rollings) to soften before finishing conditioning with the pasta machine.

Tip: To make conditioning of firmer clays even easier, place wrapped blocks on a Ziplock bag of rice or barley that's been zapped in a microwave for 30-45 seconds. The clay will stay warm for up to an hour (Never microwave your clay!). Unwrapped clay can be set on the bag with a deli sheet or parchment paper in between the two. Do not overheat the rice to keep it warmer longer. This can cause the clay to begin curing prematurely and ruin it. Some people are even known to sit on their unwrapped bars or put them in their pockets to warm before conditioning.

A smooth ceramic tile is the best work and baking surface. A piece of deli paper can be placed between clay and tile to prevent shiny spots to develop during baking. Keep in mind that paper may curl when cooling, so be sure to immediately remove thin, flat or light pieces of clay from the paper for cooling. If the piece of clay you baked mistakenly curled, gently hold the curled area of the clay flat while still warm by pressing flat against a cool tile for several minutes. (Be sure to use an oven mitt while touching clay just removed from an oven.)

Never leave uncured clay on a painted, varnished or lacquered surface. Once the clay is baked, it is inert and cannot harm furniture. Clay is never recommended for use that comes in direct contact with food. Even though polymer clay is non-toxic, kitchen tools used for clay use should remain dedicated for clay or craft use only and food should never come into direct contact with baked clay as a safety precaution.

Bake clay a minimum of 20 minutes for every 1/4" inch of thickness. Always follow the temperature and time recommendations for baking temperatures, listed on the package. An oven thermometer is a must to prevent burned or under-cured clay. I recommend two or three thermometers to ensure that even these are correctly calibrated. If you have two thermometers that show the same temperature, you will know they are accurate. The dollar store is a great source for these.

Most ovens are off and some even fluctuate every time you use them from the temperature setting. It's the best investment you can make in your clay work. Always preheat your oven before baking. Clay should not be any closer than 2-3 inches from the heating elements to avoid burning. Even at the correct temperature, clay sitting too close to the heating elements may burn or scorch. You cannot over-bake clay if the oven temperature is correct. Color shifting (darkening) may occur during baking.

Polymer clay is tested and certified to be non-toxic. Some people have concerns that baking clay may leave a residue in their oven and are not comfortable with the idea of baking food in the same oven. There has never been any proof that polymer clay baked in the same oven as food poses any health risks. If you are concerned, some extra precautions you can take are:

- Use an oven-toaster oven dedicated only to clay use
- Wipe the walls with oven cleaner after baking clay.
- Create a baking chamber. Use an old roasting pan with a lid to bake your clay in. If the clay is too high to bake with the lid, tent the pan or baking sheet tightly with aluminum foil.

Let clay cool completely before handling. It is still soft and brittle while warm.

After working with clay, clean hands thoroughly before handling food. Rub a pumice-based waterless hand cleaner or hand sanitizer over hands followed by water. Finish with a soap and water washing to remove all traces of clay residue. Baby wipes work well to clean hands between clay colors.

Great resources for clay info and products:

www.lisapavelka.com (contact and product catalog for Lisa Pavelka)

www.polymercafe.com (magazine devoted to the polymer clay arts)

www.polymerclaycentral.com (great site for inspiration)

www.glassattic.com (the polymer clay encyclopedia)

www.polymerclaydaily.com (fabulous site for creative inspiration)