

Firing Tips

USING THE THREE CONE SYSTEM

All ceramic products fire within a range to develop best fired properties. Some products such as stoneware have a wide firing range. Other products such as porcelain slip and leadless glazes have a narrow firing range (less than 2 cone numbers).

To be sure ware is properly fired, it is important to understand how your kiln is firing. The Three Cone System is an excellent way to do this.

What is the Three Cone System

The Three Cone System consists of three consecutively numbered cones:

- Firing Cone** - cone number recommended by manufacturer
- Guide Cone** - one cone number cooler
- Guard Cone** - one cone number hotter

For example: Cones 017 (guide cone), 018 (firing cone), 016 (guard cone)

Uses for the Three Cone System

- determine temperature uniformity in the kiln
- check the performance of the Kiln-Sitter® or electronic controller
- manually shut off the kiln by direct observation of the cones bending

- evaluate heatwork that ware receives during firing

How Witness Cones Work

Pyrometric cones indicate how much heat has been absorbed. Witness cones set on the shelf near the ware are true indicators of whether the ware received the proper amount of heat. Products are expected to be fired to a cone number or within a range of numbers. For some products, good results can be obtained at a cone lower or higher. Other products have to be fired very precisely.

Using the Three Cone System for Manual Shut-off

By observing the witness cones during firing, the end of the firing can be determined for manual kiln shut off.

To use the Three Cone System for manual shut-off, place cones on a kiln shelf near the center of the load, but out of a draft and where they can be observed through the peephole

When the kiln is near its firing point, the Guide cone will begin to bend. The ware is approaching maturity and soon the kiln can be shut off.


Orton

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The Edward Orton Jr.
Ceramic Foundation
PO Box 460 • Westerville OH 43081

FIRING TIPS is a series of firing problem solvers. New TIPS are available every month. Contact your Orton supplier for your copy.

It takes about 15 to 20 minutes for the Firing Cone to reach it's end point. The cone bends slowly at first, and more quickly after the half way point. When the cone tip is even with the top of the cone base, it is time to shut off the kiln. If the Guard Cone bends, the desired heatwork has been exceeded.

Using the Three Cone system to Evaluating Kiln Performance

Most kilns have temperature differences from top to bottom. The amount of difference depends on

- design of the kiln
- age of the heating elements
- load distribution in the kiln
- cone number being used

Usually, there will be a greater temperature difference at lower cone numbers than at higher ones. Placing a set of cones on each shelf during various firings allows you to determine the heating uniformity of your kiln for the materials you fire.

After firing, observe the cones and evaluate the heat distribution in the kiln. If only the guide cone is bent, there is less heat on that shelf. If the guard cone is bent, there is more heat on that shelf.

If you do find a difference, the heating uniformity can be improved by changing the kiln loading, adjusting switching or adding a downdraft vent system.

Checking Kiln-Sitter® Performance

The Kiln-Sitter® is designed to shut off the kiln as a Small Cone or Bar deforms. Here's how it works:

- Small Cone/Bar is placed under sensing rod
- firing begins, cone/bar receives heat, begins to soften
- sensing rod presses down, cone bends with weight
- movement of rod activates shut-off

Because the cone or bar in the Kiln-Sitter® is near the kiln wall (closer to the heating elements), it may receive more heat than witness cones on the shelf. If the kiln shuts off before the witness cones have properly deformed, you may need to use the next hotter cone number in the Sitter®.

Witness Cones Are Like Insurance

Cones are considered an inexpensive way to monitor your kiln and detect problems before a crisis occurs. Use Self-Supporting Cones for the Three Cone System because they are the easiest to use and most consistent cones available.

Want to learn more?

Read more about The Three Cone System in the Orton Firing Line and Technical Tips publications. Published 8 times a year, each issue is packed full of articles to help you learn more about firing. Members of the Orton Firing Institute receive these publications at no charge. Single copies are available to non-members at a per issue rate.

For information on Orton products, see your Orton dealer or distributor. For information on the Firing Institute or publications, contact

Orton Firing Institute, PO Box 460,
Westerville OH 43081, 614-895-2663.

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