

Food for Thoughts

by Peggy Breidenbach

I'm a collector of quotes, many of which uplift, inspire, and remind me of my humanity. Over the years working in clay, I also have toyed with the idea of making ceramic fortune cookies. For this year's faculty exhibition at the Indianapolis Art Center, I decided to combine these interests by making and giving away hundreds of ceramic fortune cookies, each containing a quote to remind recipients of our common humanity—with the simple aim of spreading some kindness and joy.

While I knew I'd be able to witness folks interacting with the work at the exhibit's opening, I began to wonder how I might follow this throughout the 34-day run of the show. With the help of my daughter, Helen, who works in marketing, I decided to use Instagram as a tool for engaging viewers and spreading these wishes to a larger audience. The results were interesting, gratifying, and truly joyful.

Getting the Word Out Using Instagram

As a relatively new user of Instagram, Helen recommended I do the following:

- Designate my account as a business account—including location and website. By doing this, I would have access to insights and analytics.
- Change my default image from a picture of me to an image of my artwork.
- Create a bio. I used aspirational bullet points (Helen called this brand building).
- Choose a hashtag (the place to which folks would direct photos of their fortune cookies and quotes). Use something simple, specific, and not too popular. We went with [#fortunatecookies](#).
- Follow the hashtag.
- When printing the quotes, include: [#fortunatecookies](#) by [@pegalito](#). Including my Instagram handle ensured the posts would also come to my account. In addition, printing this on the same side as the quote ensured that my information would be captured in the image of someone's post, regardless of whether or not they actually tagged me.
- Coordinate with the art center's marketing team to cross promote the show and my piece within it, using the hashtag and my handle along with theirs.
- Coordinate with other artists and friends on Instagram to generate enthusiasm.

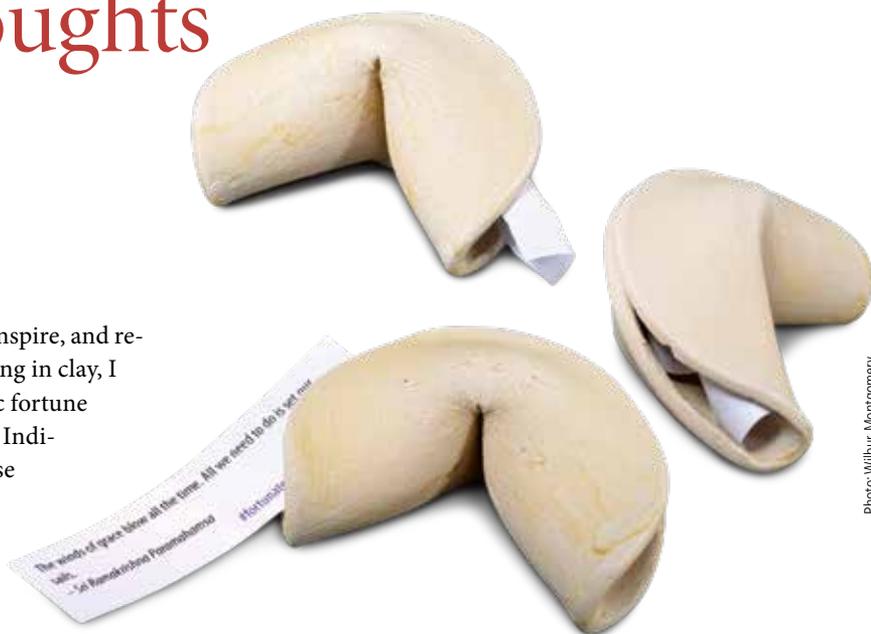


Photo: Wilbur Montgomery

I began posting to this hashtag through each stage in the making process, to promote and build interest for the work.

Making the Cookies

To make the cookies, roll very thin clay slabs (about $\frac{1}{8}$ inch thick), first with a slab roller, then with a rolling pin, releasing the slab from the canvas with each roll so that it won't stick. Smooth and compress the slab on both sides once thinned. After sprinkling cornstarch on top to help keep the biscuit cutter from sticking, use a $3\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-diameter cutter to make clay circles (1). Smooth around the edge of each cookie with a damp sponge, then fold the cookie loosely in half, and pinch it gently together at the top of the curve (2). Make a second fold by laying the center of the folded side of the cookie over a thin wooden skewer, and gently pushing the ends of the carved side together on either side of the skewer (3). When folding this second time, be careful to leave the sides of the cookie open, so the fortune can be easily inserted after firing (4).

When the cookies are bone dry, dip them in a golden brown terra sigillata or similar slip to mimic the color of an actual fortune cookie. Bisque fire them to cone 04. Over the course of 3–4 weeks, I made 700 cookies using roughly 75 pounds of clay.

Formatting/Printing the Fortunes

I had selected some 250 quotes for the cookies and because of this quantity I asked a graphic designer friend to help with the formatting and printing. Each fortune included a quote, author, and a line for identifying my Instagram hashtag and handle. On standard #20 paper, we used a three-column spreadsheet to make cells $\frac{3}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{2}$ inches, with the cell inset (space from edge) set to 0.12 inches. The cell stroke lines were later used as cutting guides. We found that a condensed typeface—such as Myriad Pro at 8 points—fit well.



1 Sprinkle cornstarch on top of the slab, and cut out discs with a biscuit cutter.



2 Fold the disc loosely in half and gently pinch it together at the top of the curve.



3 Gently push the center of the folded side over a thin wooden skewer, curving the ends in.



4 Be careful to leave the sides open to easily insert the fortune after firing.



5 Roll the fortune in half and insert through one open corner.



6 Visitors to the exhibition choosing their ceramic cookies.

Inserting the Quotes and Display

To get the fortunes into the cookies, gently roll the fortune in half (lengthwise) and holding the cookie with edges pointed down, slide the fortune into the opening, gently nudging it over the inside fold (5). Leave a bit of the fortune visible from the cookie's opening so they can be easily pulled out.

For the show, I decided on a clear plastic bowl to hold the cookies (6). The signage instructed viewers to simply have one, enjoy, and share on Instagram.

Results

- Of all my posts this year, 3 out of the top 4 posts with the highest engagement metrics (likes, comments, saves) were of the fortune cookies.
- The [#fortunatecookies](#) universal hashtag went from about 40 posts pre-show to 192 posts post-show.

- 10 user-generated posts (people who posted about the cookies during the show or after the show, and used the hashtag) resulted from my marketing efforts.
- My total number of Instagram followers increased by 50% over the period of the show.

However, the highlights from my perspective are less quantifiable. The best part was being at the opening and sharing the experience with people opening their quotes, seeing their smiles, and watching them enjoy their gifts. I truly enjoyed seeing the posts on Instagram pop up at unexpected times and from unexpected places, and I liked knowing that I had some role in spreading a small amount of joy.

Peggy Breidenbach is an artist and educator in Indianapolis, Indiana. Her website is peggybreidenbach.com and her Instagram is [@pegalito](#). Her daughter, Helen Wahle, is a strategist for Hawke Media, in Santa Monica, California.