



Philosophical Ponderings of a Farmer

The Scale of Artisanal Food (c) 2019

Earlier this year, I was asked if I could co-pack jam for a local berry producer; I would use their ingredients and their recipe to make jam under their label. Basically, I would be providing the service of the processing itself. And at first, it sounded like a great way to bring in extra income during the winter months. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that I am simply not prepared to operate at the larger scale they would require. I process all my fruits and veggies by hand, pack each jar by hand, and run them through the canner in batches of a case or two at a time. I don't have any filling equipment or conveyer belts. Heck, I even stick on my labels by hand.

Undoubtedly, these methods are not the most efficient or economical means of production. But doing everything by hand, in my opinion, ensure that my products are made with the utmost care and can live up to the highest quality standards. They are, in a word, artisan.

Which got me thinking about what artisan means. Here are a few things that come to mind:

- Handcrafted
- Authentic
- Small Batch
- Local
- Sense of Place
- Unique
- Preserving Food Traditions
- Craft
- Simple Ingredients
- Combining Fresh Ingredients with Passion
- Seasonal
- Connection Between Producers and Consumers

Most of those go hand-in-hand with the Merriam-Webster definition of "produced in limited quantities by an artisan through the use of traditional methods," although that is a bit vague.

Michigan State University goes even further to explain "the artisan process requires a specific knowledge, caring or philosophy and is most often carried out by hand. Furthermore, artisan foods have been associated with fresh, non- or minimally processed and often, locally sourced ingredients. For many, the image conjured up of artisan foods are those that are handcrafted by a skilled creator

from pure, local ingredients. Artisan bread comes to mind. One might expect the loaf to be a bit irregular and a bit different looking from the one that shared a spot in the wood-fired stone oven. Its taste and texture would be superior to manufactured bread."

I also appreciate what the School of Artisan Food has to say: "Artisan" is a term used to describe food produced by non-industrialised methods, often handed down through generations but now in danger of being lost. Tastes and processes, such as fermentation, are allowed to develop slowly and naturally, rather than curtailed for mass-production. There is no single definition of artisan food. Artisan producers should understand and respect the raw materials with which they work, they should know where these materials come from and what is particularly good about them. They should have mastered the craft of their particular production and have a historical, experiential, intuitive and scientific understanding of what makes the process that they are engaged in successful. They should know what tastes good and be sensitive to the impact of their production on people and the environment."

Wow - impressive aspirations to be sure. Unfortunately, today the term has become an overused buzzword, essentially making it meaningless. When you can buy artisanal food in a mainstream supermarket, you might begin to doubt that the descriptor holds any value at all.

As a true producer of artisanal food, how can I expect my customers to differentiate my products from the ones that are produced using mechanized equipment in large factories? Since the term "artisanal" has been co-opted, is there a better term to use? I'm not sure, but I do think the only way to make this distinction is by facilitating relationships between producer and consumer. I choose to sell the majority of my products via my CSA and at the farmers market, precisely so that I can have these connections and chat with folks about my methods and my scale. And hopefully, its working :)

I also keep returning to the thought that the essence of "artisan" is using high quality, local ingredients and operating on a small scale. My consistency might vary from batch to batch due to differences in the seasonality of my berries (June bearing strawberries tend to be sweeter than summer bearing ones, for example), how carefully I slice them, and so many other factors. Because I am intricately involved in each step of the process, from the growing to the prepping to the cooking to the filling to the canning, I physically and visually ensure that the jam is going to turn out how I want it to. I don't consciously think about it, or do random quality control testing; it simply happens as a routine part of the process.

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As soon as you start to scale up and introduce equipment to do some of the work for you, you remove your personal connection to the product, and at the same time, some of the quality and flavor. So yes, my jam is more expensive than other options, but I wouldn't want to be the face behind Hopscotch if it wasn't the absolute best I could make it.