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ARTISAN FOODS

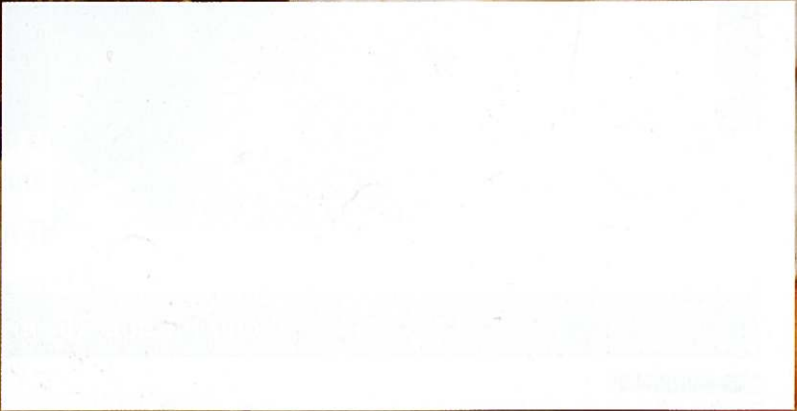
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An honest loaf of 'fancy bred'

From old world to Loompaland, artisan foods make their way across the pond and through the ages

STORY BY JESSICA SWANSON
PHOTOS BY ED VIDINGHOFF

When I started thinking about the “artisan foods” edition, it didn’t take long to realize this term was not truly within my grasp. Definitions shapeshift over their years of use, often dependent on context, a slippery and kaleidoscopic measuring stick itself.

What is an artisan food? I decided to ask Ian Titterton, director of the 43-year-old baking program at Clark College, who has the inspirational quote from Willy Wonka pinned to the bottom of his emails: “We are the music makers, and we are the dreamers of dreams.” Wonka, the fictional candy maker, whose ways were anything but traditional, was nonetheless an artisan, a crafter of goods on a small scale using the most extraordinary ingredients.

And that’s where we begin to define artisan foods.

“Artisan food is one of those (terms) that’s got distorted and bastardized over the last few years,” said Ian in his British lilt. He means that although “old fashioned craft oriented techniques” have returned to bakeries across the country, for many, if the bread looks like an artisan loaf and smells like an artisan loaf, it must be an artisan loaf. Unfortunately, with the marketing of the term, this just isn’t true – especially if one finds oneself inhaling the aroma of such loaves in a chain grocery store bakery.

Ian reads from the Prentice Hall Culinary Dictionary: “What is artisan? A craftsman-like approach to baking or cooking in which the baker’s skill, knowledge and intuition and the quality of raw materials are given the highest priorities.” Enter Willy Wonka.

But the historical piece – the piece that brings a technique or recipe down through the ages – cannot be unmarried from the Prentice Hall definition. In the 1980s a French boulanger named Lionel Poilâne ignited the artisan movement when



he took over his father's business, blew the dust off traditional old-world recipes and watched customers line up at his bakery door morning after morning.

The conundrum in America is that true artisan foods are often not affordable to the masses but mass produced artisan foods aren't, obviously, artisan. Ian hopes to see the scales tip as the movement catches on, and food made with old world techniques and top-notch ingredients will be available to the average person for a price fair to all. But, he said, "if you buy a crusty loaf of bread a couple of times a week, I'd say that's money well spent."

As demand for Lionel Poilâne's bread grew and he began shipping it overseas, he employed many bakers, solving the problem of mass production, said Ian. The bakers, together, could make large quantities of bread, but each individual was still using his skill, knowledge, intuition and the best ingredients and, thus, was still an artisan.

Ian cites cheeses, breads and cured meats as some of the most readily available artisan foods in this country. Universities are even offering artisan cheese making, teaching the "old ways," and Ian himself has transformed Clark College's baking program to include – indeed to elevate – artisan bread techniques and concepts.

Ian has been in the bakery and food-making business for 40 years, training in England and working in shops of all sizes, including aboard a ship with the (British) Merchant Navy and a seven-year stint at Portland's artisan candy maker, Moonstruck Chocolatier. He baked at a "Michigan hippie bakery," where everything was made with whole wheat flour and honey. And while it was certainly wholesome food, said Ian, all the goods tasted like whole wheat flour and honey – not exactly artisan.

Greg Mistell, an original owner of Portland's Pearl Bakery and current owner and head baker of Fleur de Lis Bakery and Café in the city's Hollywood district, is on the Clark College baking program advisory committee. Ian reads from an essay by the master baker, entitled *An Honest Loaf*: "To bake an honest loaf the baker maintains the integrity of the bread-baking process, facing day-to-day challenges without taking shortcuts. The baker realizes that his or her art is on display not in a museum but in a home, around the family dinner table sharing all the joys and pain of reality."

Honestly, I would agree.

Over the next several pages are interviews with artisans, folks who use old-world techniques and who craft each of their goods one at a time. These folks are beloved in the community and were recommended for this feature by readers. And since it's hard to crack open an honest loaf of bread without toasting it (no pun intended) with a good bottle of wine, we sent the Columbia Willamette Enological Society to sniff out the best bottles at a handful of local wineries.

With a nod to Shakespeare and a pun on the word bread, the wise Willy Wonka asks, "Where is fancy bred? In the heart or in the head?"

Sounds to me like an honest loaf hails a good deal from both. Bon appétit! **CB**