

# Defining Artisan: What It Is and What It Means

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I have been immersed in the world of artisan baking for almost 20 years as a baker, teacher, and consultant. I don't often think about the definitions or qualifiers of artisan bread. I feel qualified to recognize one but am not often asked to define what it is. When I was asked to offer my perspective for this article, I put a lot of thought into the definition long before I wrote the first word. I decided it was important to get a well-rounded perspective and awareness of what is being sold as artisan bread these days. I spend a lot of times in artisan-style bakeries, so I took some time to walk through the bread aisles and bakeries of a few supermarkets as well. I asked myself, "Is it the ingredients, the process, the amount of work done by hand or machine, or the bread itself that matters most?"

The more I thought about the answers, the more I found myself going in circles: telling myself it's the ingredients that matter; it's the process that matters; it's the characteristics of the bread that matter. I finally concluded that it isn't only one thing, and it isn't always everything. One thing that is certain is that bakers will never unanimously agree on a definition, because it is subjective and always will be.

A true artisan baker is a skilled craftsperson whose bread is defined by method and ingredients. For most, they make bread this way because of a deep-rooted passion for how food should be made. The best ingredients, minimal number of ingredients, respect for the process, and bread that is flavorful and nutritious are all things that matter to artisan bakers.

For those who believe they are making artisan bread and aren't, I suspect they don't care what it truly means. This would include small bakeries that may not know better and may not wish to, as well as large industrial bakers who are defining artisan through marketing, data, and profitability instead of letting the bread define itself. Flavor is often an afterthought. They don't have the same passion or drive to create artisan breads that is true of craft bakers. In most cases, the term artisan is nothing more than a marketing gimmick used to attract consumers.

Looking at the most common definitions for "artisan," I found myself agreeing that it is most often used as a noun to describe a skilled craftsperson, who is often doing the work by hand. In the world of bread and baking, artisan is also used as an adjective, not only for the baker but for the bread they make. For example, artisan bakers bake artisan breads or, as some would argue, artisanal breads.

I want to focus on the part of the definition that describes the work as being done by hand because I think it puts the work of an artisan baker in context and establishes a point of reference. If we look back to a time when the only way to make bread was by hand, when there were no machines or only very

basic machines, no chemical additives, and no commercial yeast, it was a time when most likely all breads were artisanal. Bread was the result of a process that required long hours, hard physical labor, and a working knowledge of the ingredients and how to coax the best out of them. Baking was done in a stone hearth, wood-fired oven because that is all that was available.

Although bakers at the time had a much less thorough understanding of the process at a chemical and physical level than we do today, they knew how to transform flour into bread, and because they worked within their limitations, knowing no other way, they made flavorful, nutritious, naturally leavened artisan breads. For example, long fermentation with sourdough was a tool used to give strength to weak flour and create leavened dough that resulted in bread with complex flavors and aromas. This process was lost when modern high-speed machinery eliminated long fermentation, replacing it with high-speed mixing and the use of additives.

Only now are we defining what is artisan bread to distinguish it from the excess of commercially mass-produced bread found in the marketplace.

## Ingredients

The easiest place to start when defining a loaf of artisan bread is the ingredient list. Starting with the best ingredients available for flavor, performance, and consistency is the easy part. Choosing the right ingredients at the right price is an artisan mind-set. Ingredients are all too readily available to think otherwise. You will find it hard to convince me that a bakery needs to buy ingredients primarily based on price to compete, as they often do. The return on use of better ingredients far outweighs their cost.

Just as it is in any loaf of bread, flour is the major ingredient in a loaf of artisan bread. Except for malted barley and enrichments, and some would argue against inclusion of even those additions, the flour should be free of treatments and additives.

Some bakers would likely argue otherwise, but I believe that no matter the style of the finished loaf, artisan bread should be free of ingredients that replace a function that could be achieved through time and technique or that interfere with the inherent function of the ingredients and process. I'm not speaking of an ingredient such as commercial yeast, which when used properly can be a beneficial tool for artisan methods and just as acceptable as using wild yeast for sourdough. I'm speaking more about ingredients that replace skill and technique. One example would be the use of L-cysteine to improve extensibility—there are artisan techniques that can be used to do this.

It is also important to note that what is left out of the ingredient list is not an automatic qualifier for artisan bread, as some would like to think. The front of the package tells you what the producer wants you to believe. The back of the package tells you something different. Strolling through the supermarket I am amused by labels with "artisan" on bread packaging next to claims of "no high fructose corn syrup, artificial colors, or added

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flavors.” Then I look at the ingredients and see that the bread contains the powerful emulsifier DATEM (diacetyl tartaric acid ester of mono- and diglycerides) and the preservative calcium propionate. The idea that leaving an ingredient out makes a loaf artisan is wrong at best and deceptive at worst.

This goes for added ingredients as well—including certain ingredients or methods in the process also does not make a loaf artisan. The use of sourdough is not an automatic qualifier nor is the use of whole grains, non-GMO-certified ingredients, or all-natural ingredients, for example.

There are and will always be points of controversy concerning use of ingredients. The use of ascorbic acid (vitamin C) as an oxidizer is one example of an ingredient that would be acceptable to some but not all artisan bakers. At high levels, it can replace fermentation to build strength, improve the fermentation tolerance of the dough, and increase volume. Take a baguette with ascorbic acid added as an example. At a high enough usage percentage, ascorbic acid will produce unnatural characteristics due to excessive strength, resulting in a loaf with abnormal volume for its weight, a fluffy, cotton-like interior, and a paper-thin, crackly crust. At the right level, it can be used in a long-fermented artisanal style loaf to improve tolerance in the dough-handling process without changing many, if any, of the final characteristics. When used properly, many bakers and most consumers would not even know it is present.

Some would argue that if the process is not compromised and the final characteristics are indistinguishable from a loaf made without ascorbic acid, then why can the loaf made with ascorbic acid not qualify as artisan? Perhaps the stronger argument is that if a true artisan was making the bread, they would not need the ascorbic acid and would give the process the attention required to obtain the same results without the insurance provided by the additive.

Clean labels also do not define artisan. Examples of this would be the use of vinegar or cultured wheat as mold inhibitors or enzymes used to mimic freshness through the degradation of starch over time. It is unfortunate that these ingredients even need to be considered. It is my opinion that because of the way food is distributed and brought to market, shelf life is far too high on the list of priorities. Manufacturers are always looking for ways to extend their reach and increase sales. As a result, food is moved long distances, over multiple days, in and out of warehouses, before it hits store shelves, where it needs to retain its intended characteristics until the consumer has a chance to purchase and eat it. I would argue that this is acceptable for canned goods and snack foods, but not for fresh baked goods, and certainly not for artisan breads. For artisan breads, especially those that are free of any fats or sweeteners, true freshness is most often measured in days, and sometimes even hours, such as in the case of baguettes.

There are some exceptions in which artisan breads have a longer shelf life as a result of process and ingredients used. For example, a loaf of sourdough will become inedible because of dryness long before it molds. This is, in part, a result of the low pH caused by natural fermentation. Sourdough bread also tends to be denser and to stale more slowly because of the acidity. In the past, when nothing went to waste and modern methods and ingredients didn't exist, it was acceptable that bread was not the same on day three as it was on day one. This was considered normal. The bread was eaten until it was gone. It was too valuable to do otherwise. Artisan breads made from long-fermented, enriched doughs also benefit from the inclusion of sugar and

fat, which result in tenderness and moisture-retaining properties. Challah bread would be a good example of this type of bread.

Unfortunately, commercial producers have adopted new standards to which consumers have become accustomed. Even worse, even consumers who appreciate the qualities of a well-made artisan loaf, will often attach commercial, additive-supported expectations to it. For example, they recognize the flavor of a well-made artisanal loaf but want it to be the same a week after they buy it as it was on day one.

### **Hand Work Versus Automation**

Some artisan bakers forbid the use of any machines. Others are comfortable with full automation and have equipped bakeries with machines used to complete steps that have traditionally been completed by hand, such as dividing dough, shaping loaves, and scoring the bread before it is loaded into the oven. A combination of hand work and the use of some machines is acceptable to most artisan bakers.

I see machines as acceptable in the process if they don't compromise the artisan characteristics of the final loaf or require a change in process that compromises the final baked bread. Compromised properties might include a tighter crumb structure resulting from machine shaping or diminished flavor resulting from cutting fermentation time to allow for easier machine handling of the dough.

Common reasons bakers offer to justify the use of machines are to ease the workload, reduce injuries, cut costs, and increase efficiency. It is important to respect the bread and process but also the baker. Our bodies are not built to last forever. I fully support the use of modern equipment that can improve the quality of life for a baker, giving them longevity in the craft and for many years beyond their career.

If you can achieve the same result by machine as by hand, then the bread will usually appear to be artisan. This requires a complete understanding of the process. If you understand the process, then you can choose the right machine for the job, so there is minimal, if any, need to adapt the dough to fit the machine. In addition, engineers have learned how to build machines that are suited to the artisan process. I have witnessed machines handling dough more gently than human hands. This technology is impressive and constantly improving. One of the things that machines do well is they do the same thing every day throughout the day. This may imply that machines and automation make the process more “idiotproof.” I would argue that it actually requires better bakers. The challenge is to provide the machine with the same dough every day, because machines cannot adapt the way hands can to manage day-to-day differences in how the dough feels. This is not easy considering how many variables there are in the breadmaking process.

### **Identifying an Artisan Loaf**

One of the most degraded artisan breads on the market is ciabatta. It is a great example of how a truly artisan bread can be turned into one that is artisan only by name. It also presents a good case for why the characteristics of the final loaf can determine whether it is artisan or not, even when all other qualifiers are met.

A traditional ciabatta is a free-form loaf, rectangular in form, but irregular at the same time. The crisp, well-baked, but not too thick, crust yields to a moist, irregular crumb structure of large holes encapsulated by thin membranes of baked dough

resulting from the high water content. The complex aromas and flavors imparted by long fermentation are intoxicating. Its popularity is a result of everything people think of in regard to an artisan loaf, including a crisp crust, floured top, and rustic look as a result of minimal or almost no shaping. The top of the loaf has a beautiful, minimal coating of flour, which is the result of using the right amount of flour needed to handle such a wet dough, but not so much that it interferes with the flavor. The beauty of ciabatta lies in its irregularities and imperfections.

The popularity of this bread has likely grown because of its versatility and mass appeal. Unfortunately, the same reasons have led to the commercialization of a loaf that is no longer rustic, no longer crusty, and no longer beautiful because of its imperfections. Instead, it is uniform in height and color and rarely baked to even the least amount of crispiness. It is no longer artisan.

To recognize an authentic loaf of artisan bread it is helpful to understand what happened with ciabatta. How did an authentic artisan bread become so commercialized? It's hard to find a sandwich menu, including fast-food menus, without ciabatta as a choice for bread.

Large industrial bakeries look initially to smaller bakeries for ideas. They then find a way to make them their own and force them to fit within a system that does not support artisan processes. They don't care that traditionally ciabatta is a long-fermented, high-hydration, crusty sandwich roll. What they want is a soft, lightly baked, sandwich roll that has the same exacting dimensions in every unit, costs as little as possible, and can be called "artisan" because it is "ciabatta," thereby meeting price points so the end user can be on trend with their latest-and-greatest hamburger bun or breakfast sandwich. The end product is now artisan only because someone decided to place the word on a label. A beautiful loaf of handmade bread has been commercialized for mass production. Perhaps the ingredient label is clean and free of additives, the dough highly hydrated, and the fermentation long, perhaps even sourdough. The sum of the parts, however, does not add up to what the bread is supposed to be. In turn, this version now defines what ciabatta is for those who have never eaten the real thing. For many, ciabatta is now any loaf in the shape of a flat rectangle or square. This is how an artisan loaf loses its identity.

### **A Complex Relationship of Ingredients, Process, and Characteristics**

When many consumers hear the word artisan, they think of crusty, European-style loaves. Many bakers would agree. The most widely known are classic French baguettes and crusty sourdoughs.

At one end of the spectrum there are the extremist, or purist, bakers. They choose to work with nothing more than flour, water, and salt, relying on wild yeast (sourdough) for fermentation and may add some high-quality inclusions, such as nuts, olives, or dried fruits, to select loaves. At the other end of the spectrum are those bakers who view commercial yeast, machines, and "clean" additives as allowable aids in the production of artisan breads.

As mentioned earlier, the process and ingredients define the bread. The process requires long fermentation. How long, however, is a hard question to answer. Perhaps it is fair to say that 2–3 hr of fermentation postmixing would be the minimum needed to reach advanced levels of flavors and aromas. Some characteristics of an artisan loaf can be achieved with less fer-

mentation, but I would argue that flavor cannot be achieved by cutting time, not for an artisan bread.

Often fermentation will take much longer than a few hours, especially with the use of preferments such as sponge, poolish, or sourdough. These are techniques in which a portion of the total flour is mixed with a portion of the total water and some yeast, wild or commercial, and fermented for extended periods of time. These mixtures are then added to the mixing bowl with the remaining ingredients for the final mix. Long fermentation is the only way to develop complex flavors and aromas that are characteristic of a well-made artisan loaf.

The main goal of preferments is to extract flavor from the grain, but they are also used as processing aids. There is a high production of organic acids as well as enzymatic activity resulting from the long fermentation time. Different levels of hydration and temperatures and the use of commercial or wild yeast result in preferments that are all different. Some will improve the strength of the dough, and others will increase extensibility. The better understanding the baker has of the different types of preferments, combined with hands-on experience, the better able they will be to choose the right match for the specific type of bread and process. Preferments replace the need for additives that could accomplish the same thing: preferments require time and effort, but without the cost of additional expensive ingredients.

There are many who think artisan must always imply a bread with a crisp crust, rich brown color, and irregular crumb structure. This is too strict of a standard for me. If we qualify artisan bread by this definition, we would have to ignore a whole category of soft, sweet, enriched breads, many with a history that dates back to times when the artisan method was the only method, such as the French brioche. White sandwich loaves, hamburger buns, and soft dinner rolls are all examples of this group.

I would argue that any style of bread can be artisan: crisp or soft, fermented with commercial yeast or sourdough starter, made by hand or machine—these all qualify as artisan for me. What is most important is that the bread is true to itself and that no shortcuts have been taken to create the loaf.

A well-made artisan-style baguette contains flour, water, salt, and yeast, and sometimes malted barley to aid in fermentation. It is long and skinny. It has a crisp crust and irregular crumb structure. Its complexity lies in its simplicity. The long shape shows all of the faults that could be related to ingredients or process and is meant to highlight the crust. The high proportion of crust to crumb results in a loaf with a very short shelf life. It is meant to be eaten soon after it is baked.

In contrast, a well-made artisan Italian panettone that is long fermented with wild yeast through a multistage process pushes the upper limits of sugar and fat and has a soft yielding crust and crumb that is so tender the loaves are hung upside down to cool to prevent them from collapsing. When made properly and packaged correctly, panettone can be enjoyed for 30 days, maybe longer, without the use of any preservatives or high-tech methods of packaging. The long sourdough fermentation results in a low pH that acts as a natural mold inhibitor. It is a complex process that is just as exemplary of a skilled artisan as is a crusty loaf of sourdough.

### **Parbaking**

It is important to address parbaking when talking about artisan bread. Parbaked "artisan" bread has taken the market by storm in

the last 20 plus years. This style of bread is taken from the oven when 10–15% of the time remains before it is fully baked. It is sold frozen with the intention that the end consumer at home or in a commercial setting will bake it for the remaining 10–15% of the time required to complete baking. This has certainly led to wider availability and awareness of higher quality breads, but it would be hard not to argue that it is a new style of bread in and of itself. It is made with an artisan mind-set and artisan methods, but the mass production of it has almost certainly compromised its end quality. I would also argue that because the artisan is not the person finishing the baking it is rarely baked correctly, resulting in a loaf that lacks the qualities that would have otherwise been present if it had been fully baked in the bakery.

### Final Thoughts

I don't know how successful I've been in defining artisan. Two hundred years ago we wouldn't be having this discussion. Bread was sustenance, a basic food, that was not categorized by titles.

What I do know is that if I want a great loaf of artisan bread, I will find it in a neighborhood bakery or made by a neighborhood baker. This could be a small or large shop. I will first recognize the bread by its imperfect beauty and, then, upon further inspection will evaluate it for aroma and flavor. It is a study that requires all of one's senses. The ingredient label will tell me a lot about the bread. I will evaluate it for what it is whether it be a crisp baguette, dark-baked sourdough, or soft and tender, but-tery brioche.

The beauty of having so much variety to choose from is that we don't have to judge a bread as bad or good. Consumers are free to choose what they like and what suits them best regardless of the label.



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