

## Has the term “artisan” lost its art?

Has the term artisan become too diluted from over use? The term and the evolution of its meaning is explored by confectionery consultant Curtis Vreeland in his interview with Kristy Leissle, PhD, University of Washington Bothell, Department of Interdisciplinary Arts & Sciences.

### How popular is the term “artisan” among chocolate makers?

In 1997, [Scharffen Berger](#) became the first new US bean-to-bar chocolate maker in more than half a century. To convey a difference between its handmade chocolate and the candies that predominated on store shelves at the time, the company described itself in early marketing materials as an “artisan chocolate maker”.

Two decades later, this American bean-to-bar movement, inspired by Scharffen Berger, has grown to 130+ chocolate makers in the US alone. About half of them, in a comprehensive review by Kristy Leissle of their marketing materials, have adopted the “artisan” term.

### What’s the term’s appeal to chocolate makers?

If there is a shared understanding among chocolate makers using the term, it is a catch-all statement to differentiate themselves from the “Big Chocolate” brands. The common denominator seems to be scale: companies that call themselves “artisan” make batches of chocolate that are not meant to supply a global market, or even a national one. Instead, batches are crafted around a particular bean type or harvest, which limits their size to something generally referred to as “small” (as in, “small-batch”).

### Has the term “artisan” evolved over the centuries?

Up to the pre-industrial age, an artisan was a socially recognized master of a craft. The term signified that one had a particular skill set, acquired through apprenticeship either with a guild or an individual master. Given that the capability for mass-production, using water or later electrical power, had yet to be invented, artisans operated on a similar scale. Hence, production size was not a determining factor in who could use the term.

### What is the current consumer understanding of the term?

Last fall, Leissle conducted a consumer survey at the Northwest Chocolate Festival in Seattle, a major league American chocolate event. When asked how to define “artisan”, a majority of survey participants associated artisans with making flavorful chocolate. But when asked to name some requisite attributes for making flavorful artisan chocolate, they selected “making it by hand” and “having passion.”

Given that limited understanding of the term—that one needs no prior skill or experience—the barriers to enter the profession seem pretty low. With a few ingredients and a little passion, one can set up shop tomorrow as an artisan chocolate maker. This disconnect might explain the availability of poorly made and particularly off-textured chocolate, marketed as artisan, on the shelves today.

### What’s the real issue?

The problem is that there is no such systematic training today for chocolate making. Self-named artisans largely train themselves. This means that they bear all the risks of acquiring skills, whereas historically the master or guild would largely absorb those risks.

A related issue is that, while historically a master determined when a trainee had achieved the necessary skills to be called “artisan,” today there is no such indication that a chocolate maker has “graduated.”

Without institutionalized training, it is difficult to define “artisan” among chocolate makers. Companies that use the term suggest a wide variety of meanings, which range from running a family-owned business to making “delicious” chocolate. Perhaps because there is no agreed-upon definition, consumers do not associate artisan with mastery of chocolate-making skills.

Given that chocolate makers who self-name as “artisan” do not share a common set of training experiences or third-party designation of mastery, the term carries little meaning when affixed to chocolate.

Additionally, with the evolving nature and growing sophistication of the American chocolate maker scene, type-casting this trade under one category may be quixotic. “[Artisan] was coined in 1997 by Scharffen Berger and it made some sense at that point. [But] as the universe of makers has grown, it's a term of art that is increasingly problematic,” cautions chocolate expert [Clay Gordon](#).

John Scharffenberger agrees. “‘Artisan’ has gotten a bit worn out,” he commented in a follow-up interview.

“If I was starting a company now, I wouldn’t use the term,” opined Amano owner/chocolate maker Art Pollard. His company has included “artisan” on its label since its founding back in 2006. “The term has been gobbled up by big companies. That is what happened [to the term] gourmet.”

[Theo Chocolate](#) removed the term from its labels back in 2007. When asked why, Theo Chief Marketing Officer Debra Music told us that, “we dropped the term ‘artisan’ because we felt that it was over-used and ceased to be meaningful. It had morphed into more of a marketing trend than something that conveyed substantive depth that consumers would understand.”

### **Are there better alternatives to the term “artisan”?**

There are several alternative terms to artisan currently floating in the American chocolate marketplace.

Theo Chocolate lists product attributes on its labels to help connect consumers with the producers. Ms. Music explains:

Many of our bars feature the claims “organic” and “fair trade” because they are primary attributes that point to the quality of our ingredients and our brand values, and consumers understand those more and more, or if they don’t, there is information available to educate them.... But it isn’t easy to boil your brand down to a few words that everyone will understand.

Another popular term is “bean-to-bar.” It’s more evidently grounded in process, to wit, made from scratch. If a maker uses that term, the consumer should be able to trust that cocoa beans have entered his or her factory, and chocolate bars left it. This would indicate that the maker has a relationship with chocolate’s most important ingredient—cocoa—and at least a working knowledge of the entire chocolate-making process. But it does not necessarily imply a particular skill level.

Or production scale. Mr. Gordon points out that “by the strict definition, Barry-Callebaut is bean to bar. So is Cadbury. It’s not useful in making a small maker distinction.”

“Craft” is another option. This term does not carry the same historical weight as artisan, and so can be applied more broadly. Calling oneself a “craft” chocolate maker captures the sentiment that “artisan” conveys; that is, small batch and an intimacy with the chocolate making process.

The term also aligns with other food products, such as craft beer. Interestingly, the [Brewers Association](#) has an official definition: the operation must be small (annual production capped at less than 6 million barrels),

independent (75% controlled by the craft brewer) and traditional (creating beers “whose flavor derives from traditional or innovative brewing ingredients”).

A spin on the craft term is “handcrafted,” which is what [Patric Chocolate](#) calls its chocolate. This international award winning chocolate maker prominently prints “American Handcrafted Chocolate” on its labels.

Or the term “fine chocolate,” which is part of the name of an international organization that represents these chocolate makers. According to President Pam Williams, back in 2007 when the founders were casting about for a proper name, they eliminated “premium” (already claimed by higher end big chocolate brands like Godiva, Dove, Magnum), luxury (too bespoke and 1%-ish), artisan (“back then, there were lots of artisan products that were not well made or tasted that good”) and craft (“it hadn't really come into use and, like artisan, it didn't really denote quality only process or size”).

“So we hit upon borrowing the industry term for ‘fine flavor cacao’ as we are all about quality and flavor. That seemed to make sense to everyone and reflect the quality of the ‘seed’ or beginning of what makes a chocolate great.” And that was how the [Fine Chocolate Industry Association](#) was christened.

“Barsmith” is also trending, coined by Mark Xian, the creator of [C-Spot](#), the go-to website for ratings of premium chocolate products.

Mr. Scharffenberger favors the term “maker,” as it “... applies to all sorts of things that are made and not co-packed by their brands.”

The drive to make all sorts of things is behind the current passion to Do It Yourself (DIY). DIY has become so popular, that it has spawned a movement, the Makers Movement. This movement taps ... “into an American admiration for self-reliance and combines that with open-source learning, contemporary design and powerful personal technology like 3-D printers,” says [AdWeek](#) (3/17/2014). It has its own publication ([MAKE Magazine](#)) and festivals. Makers Faires are “part science fair, part county fair, and part something entirely new,” according to the [MakerFaire](#) website. Maker Faires are now hosted in 14 cities around the globe, including San Francisco, New York, Tokyo, Rome, Detroit, Oslo, Berlin and Shenzhen.

In summary, what is the best artisan-alternative term: bean-to-bar, barsmith, craft, fine flavor or chocolate maker? Or, perhaps we are getting too caught up with marketing spin.

That is the opinion of Mr. Xian. “All these terms ... are mainly just buzz-buttons pressed on unsuspecting customers, often appropriated by big players to poach on ripe territory.”

“Bottom line: it’s a function (or fiction as the case may be) of size, sensibility and degree of personalization.”

To help sort this out, the Fine Chocolate Industry Association will be focused on **Consumer Perception of Fine Chocolate** as a theme for its summer event on June 25 in New York City.

But for now, let us circle back to Scharffen Berger. When Mr. Scharffenberger and Robert Steinberg were establishing their company, they selected the name “Scharffen Berger Chocolate Maker” as the best translation of the term “chocolatier.” It seems that the term still works.