

David Mas Masumoto: Creativity's food revolution

By David Mas Masumoto

Sacramento's Farm to Fork Celebration. Fresno's Food Expo. The San Francisco Fancy Food Show. All are about food and engagement. The junction of art and business and the rise of the artisan entrepreneur.

Food is hot. From the fields and farms of our Valley to the tables in some of the nation's best restaurants, from home cook kitchens to trendy food trucks, from cooking contests to elaborate parties and social gatherings with food as a centerpiece, a revolution in food is unfolding before us.

I've been fortunate to "witness" this evolution of food — peaches from our farm have been catapulted into this world of foodies. A question has often arisen: Is this an artisan or entrepreneurial movement? Is it about great taste and flavor or about making money? What makes the two approaches different? Similar? And how might a farmer fit this all?

Historically, farming and creating food (as chefs or food product developers) has always been about money to a certain extent. The farmer who didn't make a living from their craft didn't stay in the profession very long. The industrial revolution with emphasis on efficiencies and productivity add a business model to the equation. Farming wasn't just about subsistence work; you had to be aware of market forces. Yet the individual could still be a small farmer or simple food manufacturer who loved their work and was content without a lot of money or fame.

The creative food revolution generates new opportunities: The artisan who loved his work in food could also expand and explore new business opportunities. For example, we've been farming organically for three decades. When we started, our markets were limited to a few outlets. There was little demand from consumers clamoring for certified products (there were no standardized governmental certification processes then). But now, the organic marketplace is well established, premiums exist for products and a growing consumer demand drives growth. This was an example of a blending of multiple interests: making money while being environmentally responsible.

Today, the role of technology has expanded into a new world of creative foods. We can reach a new audience. We can market our products in different ways. We can learn about alternative methods to grow and make food, transforming ideas to product and deliver them to interested consumers faster, more efficiently and directly.

Artisans can now brand themselves. They can maintain their specialization while telling and selling their story. To reach consumers, their products need not be mass produced. In many cases, the farmer who grew the food joins the narrative — the sourcing of ingredients suddenly matters. Farmers are no longer marginalized suppliers but play an active role in the staging of artisan foods.

New "foodie" products are highly specialized and cater to the individual. This is not fast food with uniform, cookie-cutter methods. And consumers are highly individualized. They are all judges and food critics; they take their food choices personally and express themselves.

This is sold as an opportunity. Entrepreneurship is not about selling out to make a quick buck. The new food world is also open to diversity. New flavors of people are involved: more women, more ethnic groups, more doors open to the unique micro operations (think microbreweries) and more business models (collaboratives and Kickstarter launches).

A question of quality should always haunt this food revolution. Are craft foods watered down as they expand and grow? Can scaling up help with exposure and discovery? Or are consumers wiser (often due to the Internet) and their fake foodie detectors on high alert? Does the taste of money cast a bad flavor into our products?

Consumers are no longer passive buyers. They, too, are passionate about their foods and more than ever are in the

position to assess. They post and blog and share their food vote. Comments are shared and redistributed. A new mob rules, judgment by “likes” and Yelp reviews. The same power of social media to tell our story also judges with brutal reactions. Quickly, “what’s hot” becomes the new best sellers list.

I believe there’s one missing ingredient in this recipe for success. You still begin with an artisan approach — individuals who take great pride in a product, a technique, a method or process that’s highly specialized. It then can gain new life and traction in the burgeoning social world of food — more than ever there’s a buzz about food.

But you also need passion and an absolute belief in your skills and efforts. The story behind food matters and it’s about you, the creator. Right or wrong, there’s a blurring of lines: We are no longer segregated by categories of producer and marketer.

The test of quality begins with the artisan who judges (and knows) when compromises are made. They realize their food is not and should not be easily replicated. They transform into advocates of authenticity and hope to satisfy a consumer hunger for real food created by real people.

The craftsman-turned-business opportunist then becomes a missionary. The new artisan entrepreneur champions a method and story. They build a community of followers who believe in the product.

A sense of place — where the food comes from — is incorporated into the gospel and farmers are part of this crusade. Suddenly, our Valley may be the hotbed of food creativity, a sacred land where good things grow and grow and grow.

Award-winning author and organic farmer, David Mas Masumoto of Del Rey writes about the San Joaquin Valley and its people. Email: masmasumoto@gmail.com.

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