ARTISAN

The word that manages to have its cake and eat it.

(Intelligent Life)

Over the past few years the gentrification of our West London neighbourhood has gathered pace. We've seen the arrival of swanky estate agents, wifi cafés and even a local literary festival. But nothing has confirmed our upward mobility quite so emphatically as the establishment of an "artisan bakery".

Until I saw it over a window full of sourdough loaves, I had only heard "artisan" applied as an adjective to cramped nineteenth-century houses. What this new usage signified was unclear, though the prices – £2.90 upwards for a loaf – suggested a synonym for "twice as expensive as everywhere else".

But in the months that followed, I began to realise that our bakery was merely the tip of the iceberg – or perhaps the Campaillette-flour baguette. "Artisan" (or its correct adjectival form "artisanal") just kept popping up, like the "artisanal toast" recently found by a correspondent for *Pacific Standard* magazine in a Californian "toast bar".

In general the word was applied to food – among the more surprising examples were lettuce and Domino's pizza – but everything from gift wrapping to bed-and-breakfasts seemed to be marketed under its banner. The American state of Georgia was even promoting a 22-mile "artisan corridor", incorporating shops, galleries and Art Millican Jnr's Sleepy Hollow, "a fairyland of fanciful gardens and dwellings where hobbits, gnomes and gremlins seem right at home". And although artisan mania had taken root most dramatically in the US, Britain was starting to catch up: on the last day of 2013 *The Times* published a prediction by a "food futorologist" that vinegar was going to become "the non-alcoholic drink of choice, on hedgerow flavours with an artisan twist".

How, then, did "artisan" become the pretentious foodie's adjective of choice?

The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s primary definition of the noun is "A worker in a skilled trade or craftsperson". It was originally a French word, appearing in the early fifteenth century; the first recorded English use came in the 1530s, when the political theorist Thomas Starkey wrote of "Few artisans of gud occupatyon" in *A Dialogue Between Pole and Lupset*.

Almost from the beginning, the term raised questions about how much status it conferred and the distinction between a craftsman and an artist. Its Latin forerunner, the verb "artire", means "to instruct in the arts", and some of the earliest examples of "artisan" refer to people

painting pictures. But for the seventeenth-century lexicographer Randle Cotgrave there was a clear difference: "The Germans," he wrote dismissively, "…are better Artisans than Artists, better at handy-crafts than at head-craft." Typical artisan's occupations included carpentry, weaving, pottery and shoemaking.

The *OED* notes that "artisan" was "often taken as typifying a social class intermediate between property owners and wage labourers" – so for a workman hoping to make good, it must have been a highly desirable label. A prime example of its aspirational qualities was the founding of the Dublin Artisans' Dwelling Company in 1876: part of a movement to replace slums with modern, affordable housing, the company's name was an unequivocal assurance to working-class tenants that they were on their way up. Fifty years later Le Corbusier included plans for "mass-production artisans' dwellings" in his visionary book *Towards a New Architecture*, while Hansard for 1929 records a telling Parliamentary exchange:

> Mr Montague I take it that an artisan dwelling is not necessarily a cheap dwelling?
> Sir K. Wood No, Sir; I think the authorities at Nottingham would strongly resent that description.

It was while researching the American view of artisans that I made a chastening discovery. In his book *The New York City Artisan*, Professor Howard B. Rock writes of trades ranging from goldsmithing and cabinet-making "to the hard chores of blacksmithing and the demanding trades of baking and butchering". It seemed I had been too quick to jeer at our expensive local bread-maker.

Shamefaced, I asked its owner, Tom Molnar, why he had called his business Gail's Artisan Bakery. "It's about making things with a high degree of skilled labour," he told me in an email. "Hands are gentler on the delicate structure of dough than industrial methods, and artisan bakers can adjust to varying natural processes, such as sourdough cultures. You wouldn't want everything to be made in an artisan way – phones and aeroplanes benefit from minimising human input from the manufacturing process; but with food the outcome tends to be healthier and tastier."

Unfortunately many other users of the word seem motivated less by high ideals than by the desire to jump on a lucrative bandwagon: as the author of the Eat Cheap, Eat Well food blog has noted, " 'artisan'…is to this century what 'gourmet' was to the 1970s and likewise is indiscriminately applied to everything from mass-produced bread to gummy Costco cheeses". According to Sara Hawker, a senior lexicographer on the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it is used "to make things sound better than home-made, conferring an extra sense of status and authenticity".

The foodies' appropriation of the word seems to have started at the turn of this century: the earliest example cited by the *OED* comes from *World Food: Spain*, published by Lonely Planet in 2000 ("The shop contains a fine selection of …artisan breads in knots, bows and rounds"). Sara Hawker suggests that its growing popularity may be linked to food scares and "people's desire to believe that their food is wholesome and ethical". In other words, "artisan" is to processing what "organic" is to growing.

The cleverness of the word is that it manages to, as it were, have its cake and eat it. On the one hand it is reassuringly down-to-earth; on the other, it is aspirationally luxurious. The downside is that, for many of us who cling to the notion of human progress, the idea of paying a premium for something that could have been made 500 years ago by someone wearing a funny hat and working by candlelight in a clay-and-wattle hut makes no sense at all.