

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Tradition as Weapon

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Mmmmm, sausage. Breakfast links, bratwurst on a bun, Italian with onions and peppers, chorizo scrambled with eggs and cheese, grilled kielbasa ... (Note to self: never write on an empty stomach.)

What got this sausage musing started was an episode of one of my favorite shows, Anthony Bourdain's "Parts Unknown." This one was filmed in pre-hurricane Puerto Rico and one of Tony's meal companions was Pedro Alvarez, whose claim to fame is being the first USDA-inspected sausage producer on the island. Pedro told Tony that, while working as a chef, he recognized there was a demand for traditional artisanal sausages among the island's restaurants and luxury hotels. Before he started his business, AlCor Foods, sausage came either from the mainland or from small, unregulated farmers.

When Tony asked Pedro how a small producer of high-end, artisanal sausage can compete against the cheap mass-produced stuff coming in from the mainland, Pedro gave a reply that immediately resonated with me: "Using tradition as a weapon ... that is what makes us successful."

Tradition as weapon—that's a powerful concept! It brought to mind all the traditional family businesses I write about and the traditional nature of our industry in general. The growing of food and flowers is as integrally connected to human history as sausage making is—maybe even more. And as you know, I've long touted the marketing value of our history and traditions, from odd plant names to the lore behind our flowers and herbs.

Yet sometimes we seem to want to distance ourselves from these traditions, these roots. We fear the term "gardening" carries negative connotations. We want to eliminate the terms "yardwork" and "work in the garden," and some talk of expunging the term "gardening" altogether in favor of something more palatable to today's consumer. We strive instead to be cool, modern and, most of all, relevant. Not that there's anything wrong with being cool, modern and relevant; it's part of keeping your business interesting and viable. But being those things and still being traditional aren't mutually exclusive. You can have your sausage and eat it, too.

Tony's show made me think of another traditional industry that's seeing a renaissance: the spirits business. Have you noted the rise in craft distilleries in recent years? In 2005, there were about 50 craft distilleries in the U.S. Ten years later, there were 769. By August 2017, there were 1,589 small businesses making whiskey, gin, vodka and the like.

Talk about a traditional business! And one that fits right in with sausage, flowers, herbs and veggies. But it's exactly that—the history, legends and lore surrounding these adult beverages—that make them so interesting to consumers and provides so many marketing opportunities. Like Pedro, they would probably agree that they can use tradition as a weapon against the competition. Then again, I'll bet the big boys like Jack Daniels and Glenfiddich know the power of tradition better than anyone.

However, to wield your tradition like a weapon you have to separate the positive traditions that give you an edge from the behind-the-times thinking that can drag your business under. For instance, celebrating 50 years in business? That's a good tradition. Managing your operation with a 1990-era computer system? Bad tradition. Specializing in heirloom veggies and herbs? Good. Still selling those heirlooms only in four-packs when customers want more size choices? Bad. Restoring the company's vintage Lord & Burnham greenhouse? Good. Provided you added modern energy-saving equipment, that is. Otherwise, bad.

That brings us back to Pedro's story: It's important to note that he combined tradition (authentic Puerto Rican sausage) with something new to the market (USDA inspection). To me, that's the best way to make tradition work. Like when Volkswagen brought out the new Beetle, they didn't equip it with '60s-era technology. Your traditions should be backed up by the best and latest marketing, services and support. As I said earlier, you can be cool, modern and relevant at the same time you're being traditional. In fact, it's essential. Combining old with new gives you the best chance of long-term success.

Okay, off my monthly soapbox and out to find some lunch. I've got a strange craving for longaniza. **GT**