

When the Strawberry Jam Boom Went Bust

Lorne Fitch

I'm going through a bit of a recession, maybe even verging on a depression. It has to do with strawberry jam, not the markets. My mother in law, who has made, arguably the best strawberry jam wherever in the world there are strawberries has stopped mixing up this fruity elixir. This represents a serious downturn for me, a jam crunch. She has her reasons; age and energy. I bear her no malice for the cessation of picking, cleaning, slicing, cooking and canning. There are better things to do on the hottest day of the year. But, this was the underpinning, the substance that signaled the soundness of my breakfast world. The glue that held breakfast together is missing.

It has come to an end. My world, if not collapsed, is echoing with the sound of a spoon in an empty jar. No more coming back from southern Ontario with jars of it; no more well wrapped jars arriving at Christmas; and, no more jam care packages delivered by eastern family members to the poor, deprived westerners. Our cupboards used to run over, our larder groaning under the accumulated weight. Jars of it piled up, engulfing us faster than we could engulf their contents. Jars of it matured on our shelves, developing their unique bouquets and coalescing into something where the whole was greater than the parts. We would ponder whether to open a bottle of the '97, a robust, fruity number or throw caution to the wind and open the latest of the offerings. Jam would be shared with all of our friends; sometimes we would push it, like some illicit substance that was rumored to take you to another dimension. To our friends, most of whom grew up in the 1960's, this was too much to resist. Indeed the jam was too much for me to resist. It was an incontestable surplus of strawberry jam.



How did I treat this cornucopia of jam? Sadly my response was tinged with sarcasm, derision and thoughtlessness. "We've been bequeathed a life time supply of jam", I often opined to my wife, comparing the accumulated jars to some family legacy or inheritance. "More jam!" I would exclaim, with less than enthusiasm at the opening of a parcel containing- wait for it- more jam. "A clearance sale on jam", I would joke, 'we're jammed up in our warehouse'. Callous, empty and stupid words! Its profligate use has emptied the cupboard and the shelves are bare. The strawberry jam train has long left the station. Not even the residual stickiness remains. All that sticks is the distant memory of that last precious jar.

A mood of despair, of longing and of trepidation for the future has set in. Because foresight isn't an option anymore I've been beating myself up with hindsight. Why didn't I extol the virtues of her jam to my mother in law; why didn't I appear more appreciative of her loving labors; and, why didn't I encourage her in the continued manufacture of that ambrosia? Because, I guess, in surplus one never thinks of shortage. The Chinese axiom that "every banquet comes to an end" never resonates when ladling on that sweet concoction of berries onto toast. "Sooner or later, everyone sits down to a banquet of consequences", said Robert Louis Stevenson, the 19th century author of Treasure Island. He would not have known of my mother in law's strawberry jam. If he had he surely would have identified with it as a substance worthy of the title of treasure. But I did not, regrettably. My banquet is set and it is void of strawberry jam.

If only I'd saved some, meted it out with a sense of conservation, been more judicious in sharing it or thought about alternatives to make the supply last longer. But I didn't. In my blindness I thought the largess would be endless. I thought the strawberry jam frontier would never end. The strawberry jam resource was, in my mind, unplumbed in its depth. The signals were there of course, but I ignored them. Any distant early warning suggestions of showing restraint, of considering future jam-eaters, or of gaining self-sufficiency in the jam department would be met with disdainful dismissal.

If I could just have one more chance, if I could just get one more jar, I promise I'll cherish it. I will never again consume strawberry jam like a pig at a trough. I will think about tomorrow and that truly rare, valuable commodity in limited supply. You may be on another jam trajectory, one where you have time to evaluate and reassess your consumption. It's too late now for me to make amends, to turn back the hands of time and to watch the jam jars magically refill. I know now I took things for granted when the jam economy was booming. For the love of jam, please consider a change. Sit down with your jam maker; learn the craft. Grasp the jam torch and make sure it stays lit. Never forget how precious those jars of canned sunshine, rain and love are. I know I'll never take my mother in law's strawberry jam for granted again.



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