

100% Grated Parmesan

I was sitting at lunch across from a student of mine who had fixed ideas about the subject we were discussing—business. I believed (and still do) that most businesses try to deal with customers honestly. “Would that it were so,” was her only comment. Having countered my assumption by fiat, and with neither of us able to produce statistics to favor one position or another, we agreed to disagree.

I don’t deny that there are owners of businesses whose desire to earn profit overwhelms the desire to treat customers fairly, and some of these are large international corporations, but I would still argue that most businesses, large or small, would prefer dealing forthrightly with their clients and giving fair value for profit received.

In front of me on the table was a canister that read “100% Grated Parmesan”. I read the ingredients and saw that Parmesan cheese was the second ingredient, followed by a few others. Then, how could it be “100% Parmesan”? Ah, but that is not what the label claimed. If read with an eye toward satisfying the FDA or whatever other federal body attempts to force honesty upon what it assumes to be the dishonest, it claimed that it’s Parmesan content was “100% Grated”, not “100% Parmesan”. It seemed clear to me that this company was a relatively small business that was not able to compete with larger, and in this case more honest, businesses, so it sold a cheaper imitation that few people would question, labeling its product in a deceptive way. That type of practice makes governmental bodies come down upon whole professions, not just the shady individual business—and I think that unfair—but there it was, in front of me, an example of my student’s anti-honesty presumptions.

It used to be that traditional martial artists meticulously traced the lineage of all those who claimed any rank shaded darker than brown belt, so that they could privately police, like an unelected government made up of many independently acting officers, the honesty (or at least the claimed rank) of those who entered the martial arts “profession”. I think they may have failed due to the fact that there were plenty of good students trained by disreputable “masters” and plenty of bad students trained by completely reputable masters and a few validly ranked yet dishonest people. Nowadays, in the spirit of getting along with each other and avoiding the political battles, backbiting, and prejudice that plagued them for decades, martial artists join together in group seminars, halls of fame, and other collective activities ignoring the fact that their very participation puts the master instructor with five decades experience in the same group photo as the fifteen year “veteran” whose grateful students “presented” him with a *hanshi* (past-master) certificate.

At one time, potential students were lost in seeking a martial arts school that was right for their needs because they not only were ignorant of the difference between the arts, but they were also incapable of discerning between a skilled martial artist and an athletic dancer, or between a good teacher and a good showman. Nowadays, even martial artists don’t know the difference between a

master and a mister who misspelled his title by one vowel; or, perhaps they know the difference but dare not act upon it. After all, what are they to do? Publish the non-existent training history of the undesirable mister/master? Insult him in public? Challenge him on his own studio floor? We left all those childish practices behind decades ago. We are both more polite and more tolerant today. We have come to realize that ultimately, only the customer can police a business. Unfortunately, most customers have grown accustomed to a governmental body doing it for them, so except for the rare call to the Better Business Bureau, they figure that all martial artists with a title are about the same, just as they figure that all businesses are compelled to be honest so they, the consumer, won't have to worry if the Grated Parmesan they buy is 100% Grated or 100% Parmesan.

More Cheese Next Time.