

# Jam Experiments



## CHRISTOPHER WILSON: ON CREATING A RICH LIFE

*In the turbulent process of turning over a new leaf, Christopher found solace in jam, then discovered jam-making was his life's work. Here, he shares his story and jam-making tips.*

The art of jam-making was passed down to me by my grandmother when I was very young, growing up in a small town in Missouri. As I grew older I lost touch with the joy of jam-making and it was not until many years later that I rediscovered it.

I spent many years in the bar and restaurant business and had developed a taste for beer, a very strong liking for it, in fact. Then as time passed and the local establishments began to close, I moved back into construction still with my love for beer. My health began to decline and I found myself going blind. In a visit with my doctor, I discovered I had cirrhosis of the liver that I had two weeks to live. At that moment, I decided to quit cold turkey and well, I'm still here, and I have my eyesight, and my liver is fine.

When one quits drinking alcohol a craving for sweet things often replaces it. Being clear-headed brings a flood of memories: I wanted my grandmother's jam – her strawberry jam to be precise. So I started with the most popular jams on the market and went down the line searching for the one that tasted like grandma's, switching to different flavors now and again. To me most tasted wrong. That's the best word I can use. They were just wrong. There was no specific fruit taste, very sweet, and the consistency was forgettable. That's when I decided to take matters into my own hands.

I started making my own jam in November of that year and began getting requests to sell it by December. I make jam according to the philosophy that jam should taste like the fruit it is made of and all the other things in that jam should be for the sole purpose of supporting the fruit's flavor.



## Christopher's Jam Making Tips

Here's how my jam making process works. All my jams start out pretty much the same. I prefer fruits that are at peak ripeness, preferably at the very moment before they over-ripen. This is when the flavor, the fruit sugars, and nutrition are at their peak. When the fruit is cleaned and weighed, put them into the jam pot and either water or juice. If the jam is to have chunks of fruit I put it in whole and allow it to naturally fall apart. If it is to be similar to a spread I start whole but will use an immersion blender to whip the product before adding the sugar. I bring the fruit and liquid to a boil and introduce half the sugar required as well as my pectin. I will again bring this to a boil and add the balance of the sugar, check for correct jell and at this time add my acidifier. If I am tweaking the flavor with vanilla bean, or an organic flavor extract this is the time it is added, same goes for alcohol when used. This allows the flavor to intertwine with the fruit flavor rather than being absorbed. Hence you get two or more distinct flavors rather than one. The cooking process actually takes less than twenty minutes. Then, I bottle the jams in sterilized jars.

Here are a few tips that I've learned in the process of jam-making:

- I prefer citric acid over lemon juice as some fruits flavors can be overwhelmed by the lemon.
- By cooking the jam quickly, less nutritional value is lost and it doesn't look goopy. Jam makers traditionally prepare the fruit the night before with a sugar mixture and cook for quite some time to release the natural pectin. Sadly this also reduces the nutritional value.
- I don't usually store with the labels on the jars as they can get bubbly depending on the season due to humidity.
- If I need to purchase fruit that I don't grow I first seek out local growers and get to know their growing process. If this is to no avail I will look for a national grower and do my homework regarding their growing process. Last on the list would be organic frozen from a distributor. I don't generally purchase from the supermarket as they often treat their produce with wax and usually a chlorine spray, including the organic produce.



## The Business of Jam-Making

Thus far turning jam-making into a business has been an adventure. There were those who advised me against it. I had to fight a bit in the beginning to prove that this, no matter what anyone in the business world says, is a valid venture. Banks are not helpful. I was told I would have to mortgage my home. Some family members suggested maybe a job working for a food chain would be more appropriate.

But I am stubborn, so I did my research. I wanted to know who was buying artisan jams, what the demand was, why some companies rose to the top while others just showed up at farm markets and were happy with the day's income.

After all of that I decided I had nothing to lose. My product was just as good as others in my market. Let's see what happens I thought. I can always call it quits since I own the company. So it began, and so it continues.

What I found is that there is a market for jam that tastes like it's supposed to taste. People really are tired of the middle of the road processed stuff. People are changing the way they look at food in general, so while this is good for me and my product it also gives me opportunity to share what I have learned in regards to enjoying jam the way it was intended to be enjoyed. This for me has been a wonderful approach in selling my jam, there's no reason to put half the jar on a piece of toast, because you can actually taste the fruit in it.

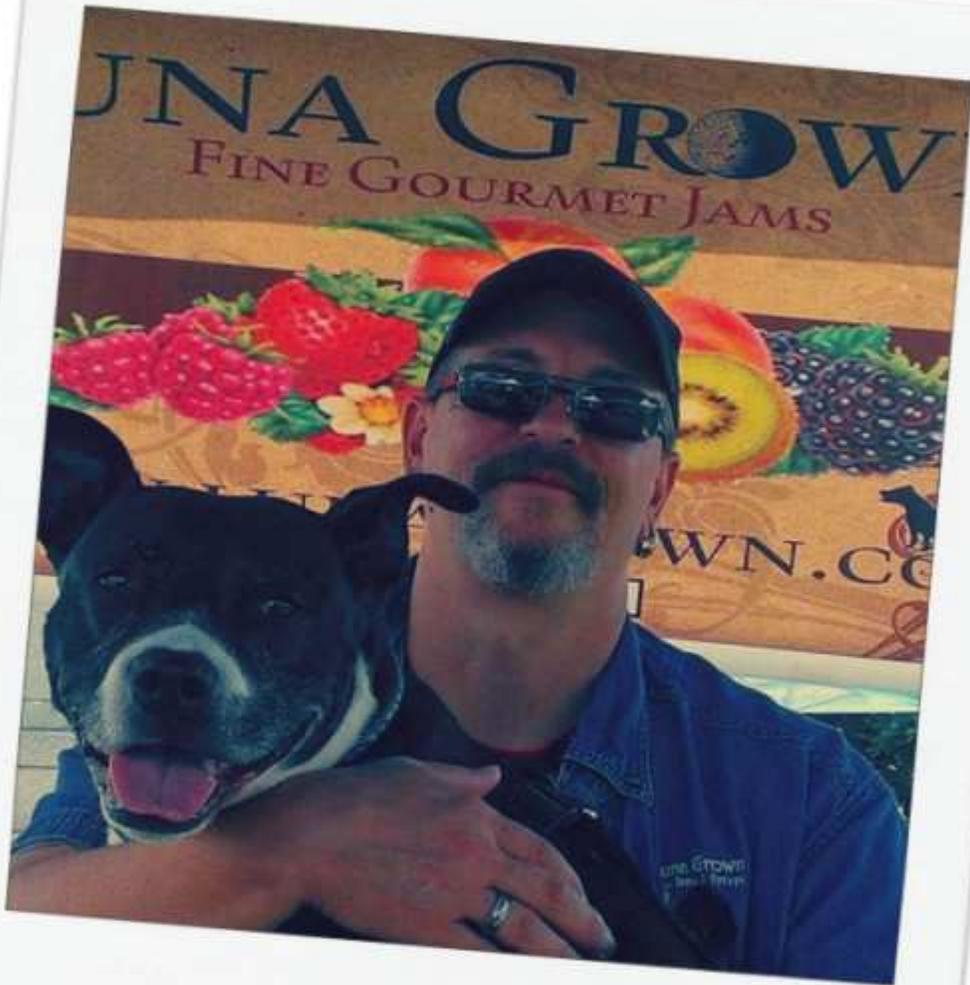
I can let people know that jam is not just sugar with some flavor in it; I can tell them why fiber and sugar are important parts of their diet. To have the opportunity to understand jam from a chemical and nutritional process in respect to itself and the human body is not something I expected to learn.

The majority of people I meet due to the business are incredible human beings. To watch and learn from fellow artisans is a blessing. To see, often times my jam product and another artisans cheese, or pastry marry together to bring the consumer something new to experience really is beyond rewarding.

In today's world some don't know where their food really comes from, so they don't understand that local strawberries are here in the spring, the ones in the winter come from another state, and yes there is a taste difference in the fruit because it was grown in soil that was different in a climate that was different. Part of my job involves helping people understand this process. It's all in a day's work.

Christopher Wilson is the owner of [LunaGrown Jam](#), an artisan jam company based in Cuddebackville, New York.

Christopher Wilson is the owner of [LunaGrown Jam](#), an artisan jam company based in Cuddebackville, New York.



*Christopher with Luna, Lunagrown's namesake.*