

# THE ART OF TANNING

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AN INTERVIEW WITH TRADITIONAL TANNER KARL KARLSSON



# WINTER

In a house in the southern parts of Stockholm's archipelago, with the Baltic sea as his closest neighbour, lives traditional tanner Karl Karlsson. I call him up over a video messaging app ('tis the age of Corona), because he has graciously taken some time off from his work to conduct this interview. It is the month of January, it is cold, and his tannery is, exactly as the nature that surrounds it, dictated by the temperature and season.

The tanning processes are slower during winter. Bark is gathered during the summer months, and not now in the dead of winter. He still tans (of course!), but during the winter months he mostly tans fish skin. He works in an industry dominated by chromium salts from mining, and where more and more leather is produced every day (but with worse and worse quality). His way of working is a healthy and much needed counter weight to that. His answers show an environmentally conscious tanner with a good eye for quality and ethics. And just like me he thinks that it is important to give good, trustworthy information to consumers about the things they buy.



**I start off by asking Karl what characterises good leather, and what consumers should have in mind when they buy leather.**

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*Good question, he replies and stops to think about his answer, for me, good leather is more about a feeling than anything else. When I see leather that some tanneries produce, I get quite sad, because the surface (grain side) of most leather today is homogenous. There is no natural scar tissue or anything. Leather today most often has a boring, lifeless and flat surface.*

*I think that smell is an important part of the quality. Leather shouldn't smell like chemicals. Leather of good quality should smell natural - like leather!*

*Ask the seller about the leather, and how it has been tanned - they should know! Whenever possible, you should choose vegetable tanned leather.*

*By the way: did you know that you can get a lot of information about leather from tasting it? To me, leather tanned with chromium salts tastes salty and horrible, while vegetable tanned leather tastes good.*

**As a tanner, is there anything that you think consumers should know about leather?**

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*Absolutely! Apply some water to the leather before you apply leather balm or fat to it. When you wet leather, the pores in the skin open, and the leather will be more susceptible to the fat.*

## What do you think people should think about when they buy leather fat or leather balm?

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*Choose a fat or oil that you wouldn't have a problem putting in your own mouth! Personally I use fats that contain beeswax. I also use birch bark tar and seal oil, but those might be tricky to get hold of for most people! The most important thing is that it contains natural ingredients. Fat from animals works best with animal hides. You could use mink oil, but I tend to not use it because of ethical reasons.*

We don't mention it in the interview, but a side note to the reader: leather fats are most commonly based on animal fats (such as beeswax, lanolin (wool fat) and mink). Other commonly used fats are either mineral based (i.e. petroleum) or vegetable based (i.e. Jojoba oil).

*«Choose a fat or oil that you wouldn't have a problem putting in your own mouth!»*



**I proceed to ask Karl a question that I as a leather worker get from time to time: “Do you think about the ethical side of your work?”**

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*Of course I do. This is the way I see it: I take care of a byproduct from the meat industry. I think the way we treat animals in a lot of cases, when it comes to farming and the meat industry, is awful. But what often ends up happening when animals are slaughtered, is that the industry only takes care of the meat. The rest (the skin included) is often just thrown away. It is incredibly wasteful, and in a way all the suffering that that animal had to endure would be for nothing. If I can take that byproduct, and turn it into a useful, environmentally friendly material, I think it's better than the alternative.*

*The fact that I exist doesn't affect whether the animal lives or dies, and my tanning doesn't produce any pollution of itself at all, so from an environmental viewpoint, I feel that I contribute in a positive way. I do not prepare fur because of ethical reasons.*

**For many people, tanning is fairly mysterious, and most people probably don't know what happens in the leather during this process. Despite the fact that I work with leather daily, I find it challenging to explain exactly what it is. I ask Karl "What is tanning?"**

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Karl laughs. *Actually I was thinking about just that when I was taking a walk in the forest this morning! Let me see if I can explain it in an easy way. After some thinking, Karl calmly and surely continues: The skin consists of fibers in a quite unruly mesh. You could compare it to wool, or boiled spaghetti in a pot. In between these fibres there is something called "ground substance", which is a gelatinous fluid that fills many functions in the body. When the animal dies and is skinned, the ground substance disappears. When this occurs, the hide will become stiff as a board.*

*When you tan leather, you introduce a substitute for the ground substance, so that the leather stays supple and flexible. Depending on which tanning technique you use, this substitute consists of different things. When you tan leather with bark, as I do, the molecules that make up the tannin acid in the bark becomes that substitute.*

**What are the differences between vegetable tanned leather and leather tanned with chromium salts?**

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*Vegetable tanned leather does not have any impact on the environment when it is tanned. The leather is compostable, and it doesn't contain any hazardous chemicals that could harm the environment, the consumer or whoever works with the leather. If vegetable tanned leather is taken well care of (cleaned and conditioned regularly), you end up with a leather that is superior to chromium tanned leather.*

*The only advantages with chromium tanned leather as far as I am concerned, is that it is cheaper to produce, and that*

*it can withstand heat better than vegetable tanned leather. It is cheaper to produce because it demands less time and effort. Often it is made in places where you don't have to take tanners or nature into consideration when you make it.*



## Why did you choose to become a tanner?

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*It all started when I partook in a course in self-sustainability. I read Lotta Rahme's book about traditional fish skin tanning, and was inspired. I decided to try to tan a sheep's hide, but the results were quite poor to be honest! But it was fun, so I went on to a school called Bäckedals, where I learned how to tan properly. I stayed for about 2 ½ years.*

*I don't actually know why I think it's fun. Countless times I have found myself lifting sour moose hides that weigh about 110 lb, and that are reeking and slimy. My back hurts, and I should be miserable, but for some reason I always have a smile on my face when I work! I can't explain it in any other way than this: every time I am finished with tanning a hide, I am always in awe by the pure magic of the proces. That the slimy, stinky hide turns into this fantastic material, that is really cool.*

## Finally: have you tried to tan something that you could not tan?

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*I have conducted experiments that weren't very successful, sure. But you could, theoretically tan anything that has collagen fibers in it. I have tanned everything from beaver paws to tiny mackerels. Also, shrews make for good tanning!*

You can follow Karl on Instagram on [@garvarekarlsson](https://www.instagram.com/garvarekarlsson)

### **Pictures**

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