



# Crafting Chocolate in India

story & photos by Isabel Putanja

After leaving her corporate job and a stint studying yoga in India, Jane Mason found herself in South America with plans to open a surf and yoga retreat. But something didn't feel right. "Every time I went to take that step to buy the land, something in me said 'I want to go back to India.' So I came back to India with the intention of trying it out and to see how I felt. I decided to stay."

After a bit of soul-searching, this former Australian lawyer followed her heart to become a vegan chocolatier. She now runs her own chocolate business, Mason & Co, along with partner Fabien Bontems in rural Tamil Nadu, South India.

On my way to their chocolate workshop, I cycle along a dusty path of red earth past bushes of bright fuchsia bougainvillea. I park my bicycle next to a grove of trees and a small altar to Ganesh, the elephant-headed god of new beginnings, and add my sandals to the small collection of flip-flops at the door. As I step inside, the floor tiles feel cool to my bare feet and the heady smell of roasted cocoa is unmistakable. Two grinding machines whirl away in the main room of the workshop, while Jane and two of the local women she employs are busy preparing a shipment in the second air-conditioned room.

Over a cup of her cocoa tisane, an infusion made of roasted cocoa shells, Jane tells me how chocolate became her passion. "When I moved to India as a vegan, I found I couldn't eat any chocolate here. So I started researching the cocoa industry in India and ordered samples from local farms and started making it at home. We got a whole range of qualities from different farmers: some really awful stuff and some really good stuff. A friend came over one night and tried the chocolate I had made and asked me from which country I had brought the chocolate from. When I said that I made it myself she said I should seriously consider selling it. So I started to sell it from home and we quickly had such high demand that we decided to expand the business."

In North America, the bean-to-bar chocolate movement is one of the fastest

growing food trends, as more and more consumers take an interest in natural whole foods and the health benefits of unprocessed cocoa. Rather than just melting chocolate prepared by a commercial producer, artisan chocolatiers process cocoa beans in small batches, controlling each step of the process, and ultimately producing a better quality and better-tasting chocolate. Most importantly, by sourcing each raw ingredient, they know where their cocoa originates, unlike commercial chocolate makers.

Jane knows exactly where the cocoa she uses for her chocolate comes from because she sources it directly from local organic farms. "We visit all the farmers we work with and spend time with them to ensure that their practices are in line with our views," she explains. "One of the reasons we work with organic farms is because they have already taken a step to do something better and are generally more open to trying to improve the process."

Cocoa is a relatively new crop to India that was first planted 50 years ago when Cadbury started producing chocolate here. The chocolate company developed a cocoa tree suitable to the Indian climate and resistant to local disease which has been dubbed the "Cadbury tree". Today about 100,000 farmers grow cocoa in the tropical climate of the South Indian states of Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

By working with local cocoa farmers, Jane learned that the jump from producing cocoa for commercial chocolate to artisan chocolate is a giant leap of faith. "Since a lot of the cocoa farmers in India process for Cadbury or other local manufacturers like Morde or Camppo, who are the main buyers of cocoa in India, the chocolate they produce doesn't need to be processed particularly well because any off flavors or problems with the cocoa are covered up with milk and sugar. So what we are doing is trying to work with farmers who are interested in improving their post-harvesting techniques so that it's processed according to taste, which is very different

to what is happening at the moment. For example, the cocoa we got from one farm had six percent mold when we first started working with them, which according to US standards, would have been rejected. We were able to identify two parts in the process causing the mold and managed to get it down to one percent, so that's pretty good. What we want is quality and not quantity, and we pay farmers more for it."

Cadbury's legacy runs so deep in India that its name has become synonymous with chocolate and its very sweet and milky taste is the one the Indian palate knows and loves best. So introducing artisan chocolate to Indian consumers is really a tall order. "Of course, any good quality dark chocolate should not contain milk," Jane points out. "But here in India 90% of the dark chocolate I have found has milk solids in it which is usually added to reduce manufacturing costs or to cover up the off flavors of low quality cocoa."

She takes me through a list of the ingredients found in commercially sold chocolate. Cocoa solids, of course. And sugar, lots of it. Milk solids. Emulsifiers E442 and E476 which are byproducts of the soap industry. Synthetic vanillin, a byproduct of the pulp and paper industry. And compound chocolate – the generic name for processed chocolate mixed with vegetable fat which is used by most commercial chocolate makers. Artisan chocolate, on the other hand, is made of two ingredients only: cocoa beans and sugar. Optional ingredients are vanilla and cocoa butter, which a high quality chocolate will almost always have because it adds texture.

By making chocolate where it's sourced, Jane is able to produce genuine single-origin chocolate, something which is highly valued and commands a premium these days. She knows exactly which batch of cocoa from which farm goes into each chocolate bar she makes. Also, in a single-origin chocolate there are more nuances in taste which change with every harvest and every season, much like a good wine, coffee, or even olive oil.

## Jane's bean-to-bar process

**QUALITY CHECK.** An initial quality check is done to see if the cocoa beans are receivable. I then cut open at least a hundred beans from each bag to check for mold and see how well they've been fermented. Fermentation is the single most important step to develop flavor.

**CLEANING.** We use a mesh tray to remove any foreign material mixed in with the beans.

**SORTING.** The cocoa beans are hand-sorted according to size and we remove any that are not suitable.

**ROASTING.** Each bean will have a different roast. After a lot of experimentation, we generally know what flavor we want to develop in each bean. Usually 6-8% moisture content is acceptable for a bean. We take small samples to be tested in a lab for moisture content and do tests to make sure there is no bacteria. Roasting can take anywhere from 20 minutes to 1.5 hours, depending on the temperature.

**CRACKING.** After roasting we crack the beans using a machine to break the shell.

**WINNOWING.** Then we winnow to separate the bean from the shell, using a winnowing machine. There is a certain amount of shell that's allowed to be in – maybe 2.5% – but most small producers like us believe that the better the winnow, the better the chocolate. We pick out any leftover shells by hand.

**CONCHING.** This step aerates the

cocoa and helps it develop flavor, distributing the cocoa butter over all the particles. We play with temperature to release flavors. There's lots of debate about how long to conch for. This step can take anywhere from 3-6 days.

**GRINDING.** Grinding releases fat and turns it into a liquid, making a "liquor". It takes about two days of grinding to reduce the size of the particles to the consistency that we want.

**AGING.** We've been doing tests on how long we want to age our chocolate for. Not everyone does this step but we think the chocolate tastes much better once it's aged. We put it in a stainless steel tub and let it age probably for about a month. This would be the ideal scenario, but we're not doing that now because we just have too much demand.

**TEMPERING.** Tempering is one of the most important steps, in terms of the final look and feel of the chocolate. It stabilizes it and gives it sheen and texture, and avoids white splotches from appearing. We do this by hand through the tabling method, using a granite slab, metal scraper and thermometer. We do have a tempering machine but I stopped using it because we didn't get as good of a tempering.

**MOLDING.** The next step is to put the chocolate in molds and refrigerate.

**PACKING.** The last step is to wrap and pack the chocolate bars by hand.

So has the Indian palate (accustomed to Cadbury chocolate) changed to appreciate the taste of her chocolate? Jane laughs and admits that only one of her three woman employees actually likes the chocolate they make in the workshop. "Some people thought we were crazy to sell chocolate in India... because most people here do not like dark chocolate. But we have tapped into a gourmet niche market which exists here just like in other countries, and we're struggling to keep up with demand at the moment. But we will always produce small batches because that's the only way we can have a quality product." In addition to semi-sweet and bittersweet single-origin chocolate bars, Mason & Co also uses local natural ingredients and flavors to create a range of flavored chocolate like coconut milk, chili and cinnamon, orange, roasted cashew, and sea salt. The chocolate is sweetened with organic unrefined cane sugar sourced from a farmers' cooperative.

While the bean-to-bar movement benefits consumers who can enjoy a better quality chocolate, as well as farmers who receive better pay for a better quality cocoa bean, there are other tangible gains. Issues like fair trade, deforestation, child labor and environmental sustainability are factors which are increasingly being addressed in the movement towards sustainable cocoa. "Since we buy direct from our farmers and spend time on their farms, we're sure of the practices they employ. We see how they work and ensure that they use sustainable methods. For example, one of the main farms we work with has a policy that all plant waste is reused for mulching. We think this sustainable method of growing is one of the reasons their chocolate has different properties from the others."

Artisan chocolate is causing a small revolution in chocolate making that has the potential to change not only palates but also production practices, which benefit cocoa farmers in a positive and sustainable way while delivering a high-quality product to chocolate lovers. The bean-to-bar movement is another example of how less is more, and how quality over quantity can create a win-win situation for all. △



photo courtesy of Mason & Co

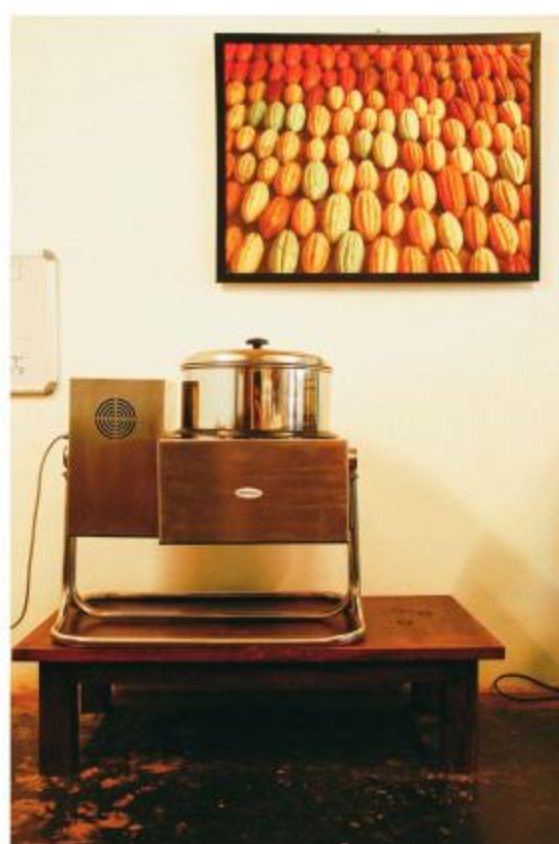


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