

Dancing the Cocoa

The evolution of a bean-to-bar chocolate manufacturer in Trinidad.

by Isabel Brash
Cocobel Chocolatier

In Trinidad, we dance the cocoa to polish the beans with our feet to an earth brown sheen (Figure 1) before they are exported.

Unlike dancing the cocoa, chocolate making is not a tradition in my island. What we do not prepare for export, we eat and drink directly from the Food of the Gods itself and we make cocoa tea using ground beans and spices.

I dance the cocoa in my own way — finishing the choreography that the farmer started — from roasting the beans to moulding smooth chocolate bars, barks and fruity bonbons (Figure 2). This dance with cacao has changed me and now roots me in the land where I was born.

HOW I CAUGHT THE COCOA JUMBIE

Who knows how the original Amerindians first

found the way to transform a bitter bean into the delectable brew fit for kings? This knowledge has been part of civilization for over five thousand years, and available for anyone. And yet, I consider it my good fortune to have rediscovered it — like Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole — just a few years ago.

My chocolate making was born out of curiosity. It was an experiment in transformation that transformed me. When interest becomes obsession, an all-consuming passion, we say you are possessed, you “have a jumbie.” My jumbie is cacao, xocoatl, chocolate. My father called her *cocobel* — brown beauty, earth born.

My first taste of fine chocolate was at an international food fair in Trinidad. It was a Valrhona chocolate called Gran Couva (named after a place in Trinidad) with a traditional Trini-style plantation house sketched on the wrapper. I had never tasted anything like that before and I wondered why it was not made in Trinidad. A seed was planted then but it bore no fruit until I had the chance to wonder again some years later. Having completed my degree in architecture, I was frustrated with that career in Trinidad and starving for inspiration.

It was sometime in my 28th year when I wondered how chocolate is made from cocoa. I searched the internet, ordered books and was anxious to experiment. This was going to be another one of my many afterwork projects that would keep my creative mind stimulated.

When I mentioned to my brother that I was going to try to make chocolate, he offered to bring me beans from an estate he had recently bought. Rancho Quemado lies in the deep south of Trinidad. It is planted in a variety of trees including cedar, teak, mahogany, orange, coffee and cocoa.

Serendipity! The day he brought me about five ►

Dancing the Cocoa



After drying the beans, some farmers will “dance” the cocoa, the traditional way of polishing the beans. Some water is splashed onto the pile of dry beans and the farmers will dance bare footed so that the beans rub together. This gives them a nice sheen that might be more attractive to the buyer.

Figure 1