

BY SUCHETA RAWAL
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GREG MILLER

SWEET SUCCESS

CocoaTown is paving a path for the sustainable chocolate industry around the globe

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CocoaTown employee Gary Mitchell pours cocoa beans into the CocoaT Power Cracker, which breaks them into pieces.



husband-and-wife team Dr. Balu M. Balasubramanian and Andal Balu flew from their home in Alpharetta to a chocolate trade show in Salvador, Brazil. Their suitcases were filled with information on their company and samples of chocolates made from their machines. But the couple soon realized the samples weren't needed—their company, CocoaTown, was already one of the biggest names at the show.

“We walked into a seminar about the New American, or two-ingredient, chocolate,” Balasubramanian says. “The French chocolate expert presented a case study of 30 bean-to-bar chocolate makers, and 29 of them were CocoaTown customers. After the seminar, we introduced ourselves to the presenter and asked her why she was promoting CocoaTown. She responded, ‘Because CocoaTown has revolutionized the industry.’ We did not know that we were so big already!”

Before CocoaTown, the greatest challenge for budding chocolate makers was the need for heavy capital investment and finding large warehouse space to accommodate the bulky machinery. CocoaTown is the first in the industry to design, develop, manufacture, and market patented machines to create bean-to-bar chocolate and gourmet foods. Everyone from chocolate enthusiasts to cacao farmers can now make their own chocolate in a space as small as a 10-by-10-foot room.

Currently, CocoaTown makes 20 machines in a range of sizes for the entire chocolate-making process. Machines are customized based on a customer's budget, geographical area, processing volume, and desired accessories. The entry-level “kit,” including a junior roaster, manual cracker (to pull the husk off the nibs), winnower (to separate the nibs), melanger (stone grinder), and pre-grinder, retails for \$5,400—\$6,500 if you add maintenance parts and entry-level chocolate-making workshops. Kits go up from there in quality, size, and price; commercial kits, aimed at large-scale producers, cost almost \$40,000. To date, CocoaTown has supplied equipment to more than 5,000 cocoa farmers and chocolate makers around the world.

Dr. Balu and Mrs. Andal, as they are affectionately called, immigrated from southern India to Atlanta in 1981 and 1983, respectively. In India, Andal earned a Master of Science degree in botany and worked as an agricultural scientist. In Atlanta, she had a hard time finding a part-

time job in science that would allow her to juggle work with raising a family. This inspired her to start her own business, InnoConcepts N.V., in 1992. She experimented with a few products, ultimately finding success selling imported Indian spice blenders and rice grinders to South Asian Indians living in the United States. “We were the first company to offer service warranties for Indian products in the U.S.,” says Andal. Her garage-based business soon blossomed. By 2007, she employed 12 distributors across the country and had reached over \$1 million in sales.

But in 2008, amid a sharp economic downturn and in an effort to diversify, Andal began investigating how her machines were being used. She discovered that people from

other communities were using her grinders to make masa, tahini, hummus, nut butters, facial masks, and more. Some customers even modified the machines to grind chocolate.

The superfoods trend was also taking off, with high-profile nutritionists advising that quality dark chocolate contained antioxidants, iron, and feel-good chemicals. The positive press motivated the burgeoning bean-to-bar industry, and Andal saw an opportunity.

A New Industry Vision

Andal's husband, Dr. Balu, soon jumped in, becoming involved in the research and development side of the business. Using the granite stones from the grinders as a base model,

he designed a melanger that could work continuously for days at a time. He modified the original grinders, used for rice and lentils, and extended their run time from 30 minutes to several days. This continuous grinding of the cacao nibs gives them a smooth, melt-in-your-mouth consistency.

“Chocolate-making is part chemistry and part physics,” says Balu, who has a PhD in chemistry from the University of Madras in India and has worked in carbon fiber research, polymer research, and drug delivery for almost 30 years. He says he enjoys creating things that never existed before. Though Balu always supported his wife's businesses behind the scenes, he came on board full time in 2010.

The art of making chocolate is a complex, multi-step



Dr. Balu M. Balasubramanian and Andal Balu in their Alpharetta office

CHOCOLATE PIECES: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

The CocoaT Professional Melanger can grind five kilograms of chocolate per batch.



process. After harvesting, fermenting, and drying the beans, you need to roast, crack, and winnow them (separate the husk from the nibs), then refine (or grind) and temper them. Most chocolate shops purchase high-quality couverture chocolate, which has been ground to a finer texture during the production process and contains a greater percentage of cocoa butter relative to other ingredients. Then they melt and temper the couverture chocolate and add flavors and colors to make bonbons, ganache, and truffles.

Before crafting their machines, Andal and Balu absorbed everything they could about the chocolate-making process, from selecting and processing the beans to tempering the chocolate. “We learned by talking to our customers [and] by interacting with chocolate flavor experts like Ed Seguine, researchers like Dr. Darin Sukha from the Cocoa Research Center at the University of the West Indies, and chocolate maker Alan McClure [owner of Patric Chocolate, an award-winning, artisan chocolate

company in Columbia, Missouri]. And we attended lots of webinars. Since both of us have science backgrounds, we grasped the chemistry and physics of chocolate well,” says Andal.

Balu combined that science background with his knowledge of chocolate to invent new machinery. His winnower and cracker make it easier to efficiently separate the husk from the cacao nibs, thus creating a smoother, higher-quality raw material while minimizing waste. He studied how the nibs and husk behave to create the best cracker-winnower combo in the industry. His patented melangers produce chocolate that has a tighter distribution of the particles that enhance “the mouthfeel and flavor development in chocolate,” he says. “Since I had a strong fundamental understanding of science, it helped me a lot in designing these machines.”

Ellen Ligteringen, owner of tree-to-bar chocolate maker Tan Bun Skrati in Suriname, was excited to be introduced to CocoaTown through a colleague in French Guyana. “CocoaTown developed sturdy, no-fancy-schmancy equipment that also holds under the tropical climate conditions of Suriname. And we can easily maintain the machines on our own without having to ship them back to the U.S.,” she says.

From the beginning of CocoaTown, Balu and Andal relied on referrals, going to trade shows and visiting their customers to observe the machines on the ground and see how they were used and what could be improved. “Our differentiator is that we created brand-new, high-quality, stainless-steel machines that never existed before,” Balu says. “These are not just economical and space-saving, but also last a lifetime. They won’t end up in a landfill. Our business mission has always been to be sustainable in three key areas—cocoa farming, the environment, and the customer’s business.” And since the design is so simple (Balu says a local auto mechanic can repair them), they don’t need to be serviced by company engineers.

Doing Business Across Cultures

Since its inception, CocoaTown has created “chocopreneurs” (chocolate entrepreneurs) in more than 100 countries, including Ghana, the Philippines, India, Canada, Japan, and Taiwan. It received a Globe Award from the Georgia Department of Economic Development (GDECD) for



CocoaTown By the Numbers

\$25 billion

projected impact of the global bean-to-bar chocolate market by 2027, according to Verified Market Research (on the rise from \$11 billion in 2019)

5,000+

CocoaTown customers around the globe

>70

percent of CocoaTown’s total revenue generated by foreign sales

400

cocoa beans (approximately) required to make one pound of chocolate

\$5,400

for CocoaTown’s entry-level chocolate-making kit

102

countries around the world where CocoaTown machines are being used

\$1,250

to attend CocoaTown’s intensive three-day, hands-on bean-to-bar workshop

25

machines available, including roasters, crackers, winnowers, grinders, melangers, and more

48–72

hours to create a bean-to-bar chocolate bar, depending on ingredients, climate, and other factors

8

full-time CocoaTown employees

10

pages translated on CocoaTown’s website for clients in Colombia, Ghana, Australia, India, Japan, Taiwan, Guatemala, New Zealand, Honduras, and the United Arab Emirates

\$50,000

worth of machines CocoaTown donated to projects in various countries



The CocoaT Deluxe Winnower, which retails for \$2,250, separates 99.9 percent of the husk from the nibs in a single pass.

CHOCOLATE PIECES: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM



exporting to new markets from 2018 to 2022. And in 2021, it was selected as GDEcD's Exporter of the Year—Small Business for its strong commitment to exporting. The state-led awards program highlights Georgia companies that expand sales to new international markets.

“Dealing with people from different countries has been interesting,” says Andal. “We are always learning about cultures and how it impacts our business. For example, in 2009, we received an order from someone in Japan, and they asked us to ship 50 pieces of spare parts for one machine. We thought they were going to copy us and build their own machines! But we discovered much later that the Japanese government required that each part had to be lab-tested and that was the reason he ordered so many spares. But it took us a few years to learn why they ordered the parts in bulk.”

“We are a Georgia-based, for-profit business that strongly believes in investing in the global community; we run the business more like a nonprofit entity.” —DR. BALU M. BALASUBRAMANIAN

These days, the couple taps the expertise of organizations such as Trade.gov and GDEcD before responding to international queries that sound unconventional. They have also learned not to take it personally when people find fault in their products. They understand that cultures have distinctive expectations and express themselves differently. For instance, Andal says, “Our German customers want to know everything and ask hundreds of questions before making a purchase.”

Since starting CocoaTown, the couple has forged friendships with many of their clients and often travel abroad. They enjoy meeting people face-to-face, interacting with their families, and even sharing home-cooked meals. “It lets us feel like a local and not a tourist, and satisfies my passion for international travel,” says Andal. “We also get to see how each culture is using our machines, what local ingredients they use, learn about the benefits of these ingredients, and discover how different parts of the cocoa tree are used for additional income,” she adds.

Resources in Georgia

One challenge the couple has faced has been managing their time while wearing multiple hats. As self-taught entrepreneurs, they rely heavily on external resources to grow their business. They give significant credit to government agencies such as the Small Business Development Center (SBDC), GDEcD, Trade.gov, the Chamber of Commerce, the Service Corp. of Retired Executives (SCORE) free mentoring program, and the

City of Atlanta's Women Export University. The latter's goal is to increase the participation of women-owned businesses in international trade. “The program gave me the confidence to talk on a stage, introduced me to other awesome female entrepreneurs in Atlanta, and provided training on export strategies, building an export-friendly digital presence, and entering new markets,” says Andal.

Andal is also currently enrolled in the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses program and has been on joint trade missions with GDEcD to Colombia and Peru. “It has definitely increased exposure and sales for CocoaTown while creating more friendships in those countries,” she says.

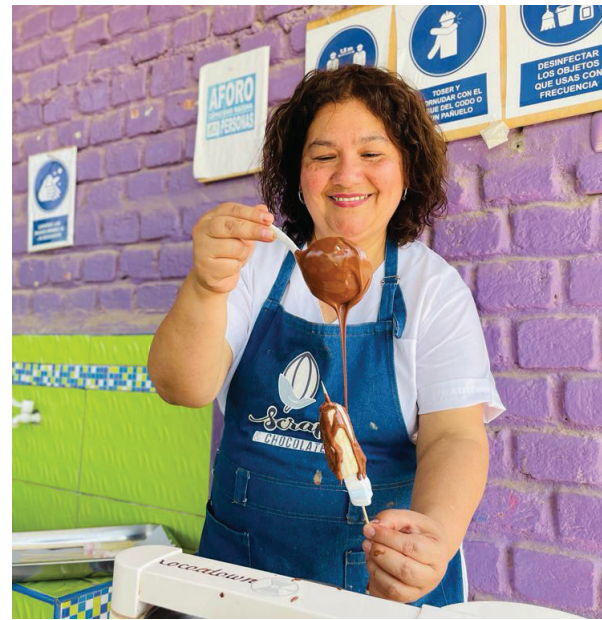
The trade missions arranged meetings with potential customers and key policy makers one-on-one, including translators and meeting spaces. They also helped bring validity to the business in the eyes of foreign buyers. “We learned the trials and tribulations of the customers and we used the information to improve our machines. Though it can be expensive to participate in trade missions, it pays off quickly,” says Andal.

Though CocoaTown is a for-profit organization, part of the company's DNA is giving back, a key component of which is keeping its products affordable. Many of the farmers associations and coffee farmers they work with couldn't afford to taste their chocolate and were forced to sell their produce at commodity prices to traders. Today, these farmers are using their own nibs to create a value-added product that generates higher revenues. Another benefit has been creating a viable source of employment and generating wealth in rural communities all over the world. The company has also donated machines to projects and collectives in Mexico, Peru, Colombia, Australia, Canada, and Nigeria, among others.

For Dominican Republic-based Chocolate Mountain founders Ryan Bowen and Jenny Checo, CocoaTown's melanger sets have led to a sustainable tourism business. “Our town of Rio Grande Abajo is unheard of, and we are putting it on the map by providing immersive cacao-to-chocolate tours at our cacao farm,” says Bowen. “Visitors learn about agritourism and hand-make gourmet chocolate bars. We also built eco-cabins for guests to stay and enjoy the healing serenity of the mountains that surround us.”

Building a Global Community

CocoaTown offers free education workshops via YouTube to anyone interested in learning to make chocolate who may not have access to courses. The *Empowering Chocopreneurs* webinar series covers topics such as recipe development, packaging, marketing, machinery troubleshooting, and problem-solving. It is available to



Top: Peruvian chocolates from Scrap and Chocolates; founder Carmen Adrianzen. Bottom: a collection of global brands that use CocoaTown machinery; Ellen Ligteringen, owner of Tan Bun Skrati in Suriname, creates artisanal chocolate using CocoaTown's machines.



TOP: COURTESY SCRAP AND CHOCOLATES; ADRIANZEN; COURTESY SCRAP AND CHOCOLATES; BARS: GREG MILLER; LIGTERINGEN; COURTESY TAN BUN SKRATI



anyone who is curious—not just CocoaTown customers. The company also offers three- to four-day on-site chocolate-making workshops in India and at their factory in Alpharetta, Georgia. At major chocolate festivals and trade shows, CocoaTown invites craft chocolate makers and micro-producer partners from around the world to share space at its exhibition booth.

Andal says, “We measure our success not by dollar revenues, but by the number of successful chocopreneurs we have created. Our goal is to create even more—and younger—entrepreneurs in every single country using CocoaTown as a medium. Also, we want to help make farming more sustainable.” By eliminating the middleman and empowering farmers to connect with end users, farmers can earn three to six times more [money]. As a result, younger generations of farmers are opting to stay and create single-origin country chocolates at their farms, rather than move to bigger cities in search of employment.”

Carmen Adrianzen, the founder of Scrap and Chocolates in Lima, Peru, has been commercially producing chocolate since she started working with CocoaTown in 2013. “I have recommended them to everyone I know,” she says. “Mrs. Andal guided me through this journey by sharing tips, inviting me to reunions with other chocolate producers, sharing my virtual content on her social media feed, and proactively sending tools and parts to properly maintain my machines. We have been able to reduce processing times, increase production, and produce better-tasting, quality chocolate.”

It's all part of the plan. “We are a Georgia-based, for-profit business that strongly believes in investing in the global community; we run the business more like a nonprofit entity,” says Balu. Shared success is indeed sweet.