

SOUTHEAST ASIA'S BEAN-TO-BAR STORY

In recent years, the artisanal chocolate movement has gained momentum in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam. Xie Huiqun delves into the intriguing world of chocolate making that's closer to home.

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Discovering Southeast Asia's best-kept chocolate secrets

For many makers of small-batch, handcrafted chocolate, it is often love at first bite. Five years ago, Jay Chua was gifted with a Madagascar single origin craft chocolate bar for Christmas and it blew him away. It was full of raspberry and almond flavour, but there were only two ingredients on the list cacao and sugar.



70% dark chocolate bar of Pahang origin (Temuan tribesmen village) by Chocolate Concierge

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“It was then that we realised the taste of chocolates could be so flat with commercial bars yet so flavourful with craft chocolates. Since then, we started to experiment with cacao, and making small batches,” says Chua, who is now the chief chocolate maker at Fossa, Singapore's first and award-winning artisanal bean-to-bar craft chocolate outfit.

Philo Chua, founder and owner of Theo & Philo Artisan Chocolates in The Philippines, discovered single origin chocolates while he was working in the States and was intrigued by how it could highlight the cacao taste of a specific region or country, much like wines.

“There was no single origin chocolate highlighting the cacao beans from the Philippines. Having grown up in the country, I knew we have cacao, but it's not normally turned into high quality chocolate bars – it is usually exported as a raw material or turned into a native hot chocolate. I made a snap decision to return home and explore this untapped potential,” he says. Theo &

Philo Artisan Chocolates started operations in 2010 and has gone on to become a multi-award winning brand, most recently clinching silver, among other awards, for their Milk Chocolate Adobo at the UK'S Academy of Chocolate Awards 2018.

Ong Ning-geng moved to Kuala Lumpur from Chicago in 2010 looking for adventure, which he found in the form of chocolate. Chocolate fascinates him on many facets (fermentation, gastronomy, farming, genetics, sensory science, design, physics, and nature, just to name a few), and he founded Chocolate Concierge in 2015.

“Looking back, I was rather naive and optimistic -- knowing that Malaysia grows cocoa and seeing a regional demand for chocolate, I thought I could connect the dots and make it at source. My first challenge was to find cocoa beans that had the flavour potential to put something new amidst the well-established brands. This meant that the cocoa had to go through each process with the conscious drive for flavour. That was difficult to achieve



Collection of “local” flavours from Chocolate Concierge, such as kuih salat.

without direct control at the farm level,” reveals Ong. To get around that problem, he bought a farm to grow his own cacao beans.

At Krakakoa, producing chocolate is a way to drive the change that they want to see: provide jobs and contribute to economic development. They source only from smallholder farmers and maintain production in Indonesia.

Its mission, according to Sabrina

Mustopo, chief executive officer of the Indonesian chocolate brand, is to change the way food production systems impact people and the planet, starting with cocoa. The company provides training and higher prices (up to three times of market price) to empower farmers and provide incentives for sustainably managed plantations and the production of high quality cocoa beans.

As for Vietnamese chocolate brand Stone Hill, products director Loc Pham tells of an arduous journey that led to the brand's founding. Cacao was first brought to Vietnam by French colonials in the 1890s. When Vietnam gained independence, USSR became the main buyer of Vietnamese goods, and when the USSR collapsed in 1990s, many of Vietnam's industries fell with it. The cacao industry of Vietnam collapsed. Most cacao farmers cut down their cacao trees and replaced it with other industrial crops, such as coffee, rubber, tea, or fruit trees.

Some time between 1997 and 1998, Pham's father Dr. Pham Hong Duc

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Phuoc led a programme (set up by the World Cocoa Foundation and Nong Lam University - University of Agriculture and Forestry) to “observe adaptability and productivity of cacao variety in Vietnam”. The selected varieties will then be released to Vietnamese farmers to be grown. The program would also train and educate the farmers in the ways of growing and pre-processing cacao beans to be sold as a commodity. After many years of research, soil rehabilitation work and forest restoration efforts, Dr. Phuoc managed to produce really high-quality cacao beans at his farm, along with other local farmers, but alas, there was no market for premium quality cacao beans.

“Our beans along with the farmers' were sold into the mass market to be mixed with beans of various quality. Our effort and story lost in the mix. Seeing this situation, I felt a sense of frustration and entered the business in 2013,” explains Pham, “To remind us of the difficulties we faced and a tribute to the harsh and rocky terrain of the farm, I called it Stone Hill Farm and launched it in 2014. The goal is to develop and expand as many high quality uses for cacao as possible, utilising all parts of the cacao tree.”

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ported as a raw material or turned into a native hot chocolate.” - Philo Chua

A burgeoning market

Pham tells us that chocolate appreciation in Vietnam is rising, albeit still at a slow pace. It is after all “not part of Vietnam's traditional food so it is still a new delicacy, to be enjoyed on rare occasions. Hopefully, that is to change in the coming years”.

“There's been an influx of many bean-to-bar chocolate makers; many of these are also coming from cacao producing countries, which was very rare in the past,” says Chua. He attributed this trend to “accessibility of information and people being more educated about the stuff they consume and where it comes from”.

“In our particular case, demand for artisan chocolates has also risen locally due to also the pride that people feel for having a premium chocolate product made out of local cacao that is on par with the world's



Pistachio Rose Cranberry Dark Milk Chocolate by Fossa

standards--which is especially true for chocolates, a product that has traditionally been associated with North America or Europe,” he emphasises.

Ong reckons that “we are at the pivotal point where there is enough momentum behind artisanal and craft chocolate to tip it into the general awareness of chocolate lovers”.

“There has been an increased awareness for craft, speciality, single origin, bean to bar, direct trade chocolate. In part thanks to the general heightened awareness for other artisan products like coffee, cheese, wine, and whisky,” he says.

“There was no market for craft chocolate in Singapore when we first started out,” says Yilina Leong, business director of Fossa, which was launched in 2017.

“The chocolate that we make is labour intensive and require high quality ingredients that are sometimes difficult and expensive to source. In a market flooded with cheap massproduced chocolate that people are used to, it is an uphill task to change consumers' and retailers' mindsets that good chocolate should be priced reasonably higher. We have not fully overcome this challenge yet, but we're doing our best to make even better chocolates in the hopes that there will be more 'ah-ha!' (this chocolate is so good, I know why it's more expensive) moments for people,” Leong says.

Mustopo echoes similar sentiments. “The artisanal or craft chocolate market in Indonesia is growing. We are seeing a lot more chocolate makers, and there is a growing awareness among



Arenga Classics bars by Krakakoa

Arenga Classics bars by Krakakoa

Consumers about the difference between artisanal chocolate and mass-produced chocolate. However, the industry is still in its infancy and most of the general public still do not understand what fine flavour chocolate is, and what artisanal chocolate is, particularly here in Asia compared to say, the USA,” she says.

The prominent type of chocolate made is still bulk-to-bar and the world's bestsellers are still sugary

milk chocolate, laments Pham.

“The most notable difference in mass consumer chocolate is the pursuit of certifications (Organic, Fair Trade, etc.). That in itself brings a lot of pros and cons. However, on the top end, the bean-to-bar movement is on the rise and rising fast. For chocolate enthusiasts, a lot more knowledge transference and product education have taken place. This evokes curiosity to bring chocolate back to the way it truly

tastes, without alterations or modifications,” he says. Even more interesting, he points out, is the gradual development of the tree-to-bar movement.

“If bean-to-bar is the one percent of the chocolate world, tree-to-bar is the one percent of the one percent if not less. This takes the form of either cacao farmers learning how to make chocolate or chocolate makers themselves establishing their own farms. This allows for experimentation with cultivation, fermentation and so much more, which can lead to wildly interesting results. We will have to see how this plays out down the line,” he says.

Beyond the bonbon

These prized, perfectly formed squares and bars may not look it, but the time and toil taken to produce them is nothing short of mind-boggling.

“Chocolate is a finicky product to make due to its load of techniques and yearly changes in nature. Things can change a lot during the



Stone Hill Chocolate Bars

process, and adjustments must be made to ensure the final product comes out right. There's no real way to learn except through trial and error," Chua expresses.

Chocolates at Theo & Philo are made with a combination of traditional and modern processes: an old-school melangeur using only natu-

ral ingredients and a modern tempering machine for higher consistency. Their cacao beans come mainly from the Davao area and are chosen based on their flavours – it has to be well-fermented, with complex flavours, no off-flavours and defect-free. Chua adds that they are also working with Gawad Kalinga, a non-profit organization in the Philippines, to make a better life for the cacao farmers. Pham, who trained at Ghent University in Belgium, uses an environmentally-friendly permaculture model, which aims to give back to the land it takes from. They have also developed a cacao fermentation process that is unique for the cacao beans on their farm, designed to bring out the optimal flavors based on the time of year, weather condition, and state of the crops.

"Juice, pressed from cacao pods, will be fermented into Cocoa Cider while the beans are fermented based on our tailored recipe. The beans are then slow-dried to preserve flavour while removing excess acidity. This takes a delicate balance and careful observation," Pham says.



The dried beans are stored in their warehouse to age for at least another two months for the flavours to develop completely before being processed. After a quality check by hand for defects, beans are roasted, broken into small bits and separated from the shell. This results in cacao nibs, which are then milled with cane sugar in a stone grinder over the course of many days into a fine chocolate mass, which is tempered, molded and packaged into bars and



65% Dark Chocolate with Green Mangoes with Salt by Theo & Philo Artisanal Chocolates

65% Dark Chocolate with Green Mangoes with Salt by Theo & Philo Artisanal Chocolates



Beautiful cacao pods, to be used for chocolates by Chocolate Concierge.

ready to be consumed. Pham explains that their chocolate carries the signature profile of Vietnamese cacao, which has pronounced nutty and fruity base flavours.



Cacao Trees from Malabog, Davao. Theo & Philo only uses cacao from the Philippines.

Mustopo, who also trained at Ghent University, shares the same sentiments. Chocolate making is complicated because there are so many different variables that have impact on the final

Product, she says. Factors such as varietal, terroir, fermentation and drying, roasting profile – they all have an impact on the flavour of the final product.



Fossa at work with luscious chocolate

Fossa at work with luscious chocolate

Mustopo explains, “Unlike other chocolate makers, we not only purchase the beans but also train the farmers to develop the right fermentation and drying process to create beans with the unique flavour profile we want.”

Krakakoa requires their farmers to adhere to sustainability practices and have zero tolerance for deforestation or encroachment of farmland into protected or conservation areas. The farmers would have also received training on organic farm management techniques to help ensure quality.

Fossa starts by sourcing for cacao beans that have great flavour potential and are ethically produced. They pay a premium to obtain the top five percent of the world’s cacao crops from farmers and distributors who care about quality and craftsmanship. “After roasting, we break the beans and remove the husk in a process called winnowing. The nibs are then collected and grounded in a melangeur with sugar (depending on recipe), smoothening the texture and refining the flavour of the cho-



A farmer drying cacao beans as part of Krakakoa's 10-step farmer-to-bar process.

colate. Finally, we temper and mould the chocolate into bars. Entire process takes about seven days per batch,” says Jay Chua, “Curating cacao with diverse flavours allows for a versatile canvas to complement other ingredients. We strive for harmony in flavours - unexpected ingredients can make delicious chocolate with the right combination of cacao”.

Having experienced the unique cocoa flavors from each growing region and estate, Ong is deeply committed to Malaysian cacao, making dark chocolate from only single origin beans of cacao, sugar and cocoa butter. The beans come from either what he grows, other partner growers or the Orang Asli (indigenous

people of Peninsula Malaysia). The key is to unlock the distinctive flavours of each origin in the final chocolate.

“Our joy is to share and make each of these origins' flavours and stories accessible,” Ong maintains, “Chocolate is first grown before being made. This means that it is dynamic, and this is what is exhilarating for makers. Each harvest is unique, and we celebrate it by bringing out its best. If we can do that, then we've done it justice.”