

The Argonaut

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FOR THE

Love

OF

Chocolate

Journey from bean to bar with ChocoVivo

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COURTESY: CHOCOVIVO



FOR THE *Love*
OF *Chocolate*

Story by Christina Campodonico
Photos by Ted Soqui

Going to ChocoVivo is like stepping into a chocolate lover's all-natural, field-to-table dream.

Hand-packaged chocolate bars containing 54% to 100% cacao line its wooden shelves. Tasting squares lie temptingly beneath a glass counter, like beautifully laid out tiles. Little bottles of yellow chocolate rose oil are prepared in the kitchen, like an apothecary's special aphrodisiacs. Stone-ground and cold-pressed Cacao Mylk chills in the fridge, while hot coco sensuously steams from earthy pottery mugs.

plantation in Tabasco, Mexico. There the beans are fermented for two to three days, dried in the sun and winnowed down into smaller bits called cacao nibs.

When the nibs arrive in ChocoVivo's kitchen, they are lightly roasted and ground into a cacao liquor the traditional Mayan and Aztec way — with weighty round lava stones.

A machine does the heavy grinding, but human hands do the rest. Chocolate makers pour the chocolaty goop that comes out of the grinder onto papered baking pans and spread the liquor into

**"Chocolate is truly food,
not a candy or confection."**

— ChocoVivo founder Patricia Tsai

But for ChocoVivo owner Patricia Tsai, chocolate is not simply an indulgence. It's a way of life.

"Most people see chocolate as a truffle, or something you eat at night, but it truly is a meal," says Tsai, who keeps a banana and a jar of black-sesame chocolate butter in her car to keep her going throughout the day. "Chocolate is truly food, not a candy or confection."

That philosophy is woven into every step of ChocoVivo's chocolate-making process — from bean to bar.

The boutique chocolate shop on Washington Boulevard sources its cacao beans directly from a family-owned

thin sheets of chocolate, which harden into bars after 20 minutes in a freezer. These sheets are then stored in the "Chocolate Vault" until they're hand-sliced into tasting squares, packaged up as bars or tossed into boiling milk for hot chocolate — sipping chocolate, as it's called here.

ChocoVivo doesn't conch or temper its chocolate, meaning that it doesn't use high-powered rollers to refine the gritty liquor (conching), nor heat and cool (temper) the chocolate to make it appear shiny and smooth. Aside from a little



ChocoVivo founder Patricia Tsai mixes some drinking chocolate with a traditional molinillo whisk

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MAKING

Magic

How ChocoVivo prepares a batch of blood-orange chocolate for Salt & Straw's ice cream kitchen on Abbot Kinney Boulevard



1

Assembling the Ingredients

Cacao pods like the one pictured above yield dried pieces of fermented cacao bean, called cacao nibs, which ChocoVivo mixes with hand-cut and oven-dried blood oranges.



2

The Grinding Stage

Chocolate-maker David Lopez pours the blood oranges and cacao nibs into the grinder, which uses friction from rotating lava stones to blend the ingredients and heat the chocolate.



3

Chocolate Liquor

A gritty and goopy mixture of cacao (chocolate liquor) emerges from the machine. It's not smooth enough yet, so it has to go through the grinder again.



4

Olive Oil Time

Once the liquor is smooth enough to spread, chocolate-maker Eric Ballin pours in a cup of extra virgin olive oil to add some moisture to the mixture.



5

Pouring and Spreading

Ballin pours the chocolate liquor onto baking-papered pans and hand spreads the mixture across each sheet.



6

Shaking and Banging

Ballin lifts opposite corners of the baking paper, flapping them like butterfly wings until the spread is smooth. Then he bangs the tray against the counter to knock out any wrinkles.



7

Stacking and Hardening

Ballin stacks the chocolate trays, which will go into the freezer for about 20 minutes to harden into sheets and bars. Then it's into the Chocolate Vault for safe keeping.



8

The Fun Part

The hardened chocolate can be enjoyed in several ways. It could be broken up into a bar, baked into a cookie, sliced into tasting squares or melted into hot or cold sipping chocolate.

TOOLS OF THE Trade



Chocolate-making is a messy business, but when made by hand its tools are simple and elegant.

Spreaders smooth the chocolate onto baking sheets, spoons mix and stir, and whisks merge chocolate and milk together for sipping chocolates.

The whisk has probably changed the most over time — from a five-pronged stick to an ornately decorated wooden whisk (a molinillo) to a metal balloon whisk — but its essential function remains the same.

A pronged tree branch or molinillo would have been used to whisk chocolate in ancient times, but today we have the balloon whisk

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extra virgin olive oil, sea salt, some spices and chilies — and maybe some nuts or dried fruit — nothing else is added to the liquor: no dairy, no cacao butter, no soy.

“It’s a raw process,” says chocolate-maker Eric Ballin. “It’s literally just nuts and chocolate.”

In other words, what Tsai (a former accountant who ditched the cubicle life seven years ago) and her team makes is probably the closest thing you’ll get to pure chocolate. The bits and bites I sample are not shiny, sweet or smooth like a common commercial chocolate bar. Most have a doughy, chewy or velvety texture, a very dark brown color and a slightly chalky taste.

But there’s something refreshing about savoring only the essential ingredients. Citrus fragrances lift off the blood-orange

chocolate sheets. A luscious raspberry ribbon runs through a coffee raspberry chocolate slice. Almonds give the cherries, almonds and black peppercorns bar a chunky crunch, and the cherries offer an occasionally gooey center.

I finish off my taste test with a glass of cinnamon-spiced Mayan Tradition Cacao Mylk and a crunchy cacao bean covered in honey crystals, cinnamon and sugar. It has a sweet start and a smoky finish.

Much like this dichotomy of flavor, I came to ChocoVivo expecting purely sweet desserts, but I left with a newfound appreciation for the bittersweet depth of flavor lingering on my tongue and the intensive labor and care it took to get it there. ■

ChocoVivo is at 2469 W. Washington Blvd. in the Culver City panhandle. Call (310) 845-6259 or visit chocovivo.com



ChocoVivo sells chocolate bars containing 54% to 100% cacao and various natural flavorings