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The Argonaut

Local News & Culture

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By Gary Walker



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Pick up the Westside Summer Guide next Thursday, May 22!

Chocolate is her passion

Patricia Tsai of ChocoVivo, the Westside's first 'bean to bar' chocolate factory, takes the 'food of the gods' back to its origins

By Richard Foss

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Chocolate is the world's luxury candy as well as an ingredient in cereals, baked goods and even savory sauces, but throughout history it has been much more. The Mayans and Aztecs used chocolate as currency, and when Europeans first experienced the delicacy they were so enchanted that they gave the trees that produced it the Latin name *theobroma* — literally, "food of the gods."

Patricia Tsai of ChocoVivo in Culver City understands the fascination with chocolate. She has devoted years of her life to studying it in order to open the Westside's first "bean to bar" chocolate factory last year.

How did you get involved in the chocolate business?

I got my CPA and found it to be a soulless job, and went on this journey to figure out what I was passionate about. I decided it was food, but didn't want to become a chef. The big moment was when I went on a culinary tour of Mexico and discovered they enjoy chocolate in a completely different way, and that was where my chocolate journey started. After five years of research and development I actually got into the business.

How did the ancient Mayans enjoy chocolate?

The Mayans drank chocolate in water, and they would add different herbs and chilies to

it. We offer drinking chocolate here [at ChocoVivo], using filtered water as opposed to milk. Chocolate is 40% to 50% natural vegetable fats, but adding milk adds a lot of creaminess and coats your mouth. When you use water you taste the cacao butter. We have four styles of drinking chocolate. In Europe they like it thick and dense, so we have a sipping chocolate. We have an American or Mexican style hot chocolate that is more liquid, and we also have an iced hot chocolate and a frozen hot chocolate that's like a frozen milkshake.

When the Europeans got to Mexico, how did they do things differently?

They refined it and added sugar, gave it that creamy mouth feel that you are used to in chocolate bars. The Mayans and Aztecs gave it a more nutty, gritty feel because they were stone-grinding it. We use a pair of lava stones to grind ours to a finished form.

Any other ways your bars are different from mass-market chocolate?

The way that large commercial companies make chocolate is a 16-step process. We only take the first six steps. We don't conch it, which means heating and aerating it; we don't temper the chocolate [a process that gives the bar a glossy sheen]. I have found that I eat less of the whole chocolate and find it more satisfying than chocolate that has been highly processed. Those bars are like eating mashed-

carrot baby food as opposed to biting into a lightly sautéed or raw carrot. You get more texture and more nutritional value.

You have some products that I don't see at other chocolatiers, like cacao nibs. What's a nib?

Chocolate grows in pods on the cacao tree, and cacao nibs are de-shelled and cracked pieces of the cacao bean. You can eat them, or grind them up and use them as a steak rub — they don't melt. Some people like to mix nibs into frosting to give it a crunchy texture, and they're useful in baking. You can use them instead of nuts in banana bread. We have a chocolate bar called the nibby bar that has nibs inside. It helps enhance the fruitiness of the chocolate.

I'm also making chocolate nut butters, grinding the nuts with cacao. We have an almond chocolate nut butter and a chocolate hazelnut butter — it's like Nutella with a PhD. This uses the sweetness of the nuts, and it's much less sweet than the version with all the processed sugars.

There are lots of chocolates with unusual ingredients. Do you do that?

Vosges in Beverly Hills was the company that started adding curry and bacon and wasabi to chocolate, and I have to say that I did find that interesting. Traditionally in Mexico they use four flavors: vanilla beans, almonds, sugar and cinnamon, and that's it. I have started using other ingredients that I can stone-



PHOTO BY RICHARD FOSS

Patricia Tsai shows a cacao pod and some of the chocolate bars she makes at ChocoVivo

grind in with the cacao, so we have 13 different blends. We use cherries and black peppercorns, Valencia or blood oranges that we dry and then grind in, tonka bean, and we're doing blueberries and lavender right now.

Without preservatives, does your chocolate have a shorter shelf life?

We tell customers they should eat it within two or three weeks, because since there are no preservatives the flavor will change. If they want to keep it longer, keep it in the refrigerator, but put it in an airtight container,

because chocolate likes to absorb flavors.

Have you tried any experiments the public wasn't ready for?

I made a chicharron chocolate once because a chef wanted it, but most people were not ready for crispy pork fat in chocolate. I want to make a red bean chocolate some time. I think it will taste great. ✦

Find Patricia Tsai at ChocoVivo, 12469 Washington Blvd., Culver City. Call (310) 845-6259 or chocovivo.com.

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