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NOV 8, 2017 @ 03:00 PM 485 👁

# From Bean To Bar: Crafting Chocolate The Traditional Mayan Way



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*By Heather Lee Whitley*

The act of biting into a piece of velvety chocolate can be comforting, therapeutic — even heavenly. But few know the rich history behind this ancient food as well as self-made chocolatier Patricia Tsai.

A graduate of Wharton, Tsai spent the first chapter of her career at a desk, crunching numbers on a computer. Her attention to detail and analytic skills landed her plenty of lucrative roles in the accounting arena. But it wasn't until Tsai took a trip to Oaxaca, Mexico, in 2004 to attend a chocolate-making workshop that she discovered her true life's passion.



Photo by Ryan Young  
*Patricia Tsai at ChocoVivo*

“When I went down there, it was really an eye-opening experience,” recalled Tsai. “Because the way that they treat chocolate, it was truly food. It was a completely different mindset, so I think that’s why there was this shift in perspective.”

Unlike the silky, sweet chocolate candy modern consumers are familiar with, the chocolate consumed by the Mayans was drunk like a cup of coffee. It was thick, dark and quite bitter, but provided

a natural stimulation and more antioxidants than blueberries or green tea.

## **Back To Basics**

Fascinated by this new insight, Tsai returned to California and set out on a journey to bring the ancient Mayan practice of making chocolate back to life. She studied the process of growing the cacao trees, harvesting the football-sized yellow pods, and stone-grinding the precious beans inside to create a pure and authentic chocolate drink.

“You really have to feel that machine; you have to push the stones and you have to make sure the stones are set right,” she said. “You have to make sure you can smell it, because if you’re smelling something burning, you have to make sure those stones are opened up more.”

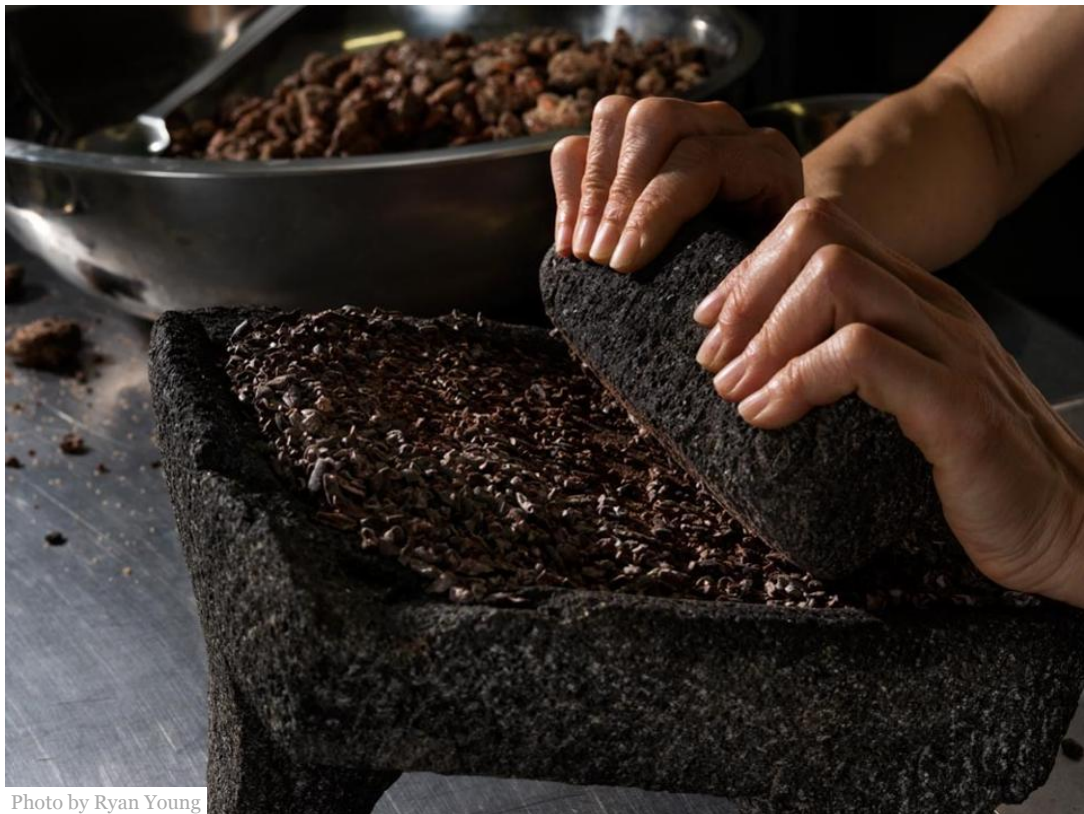


Photo by Ryan Young

*Tsai hand-grinding cacao beans*

Tsai said her passion for precision with food was instilled in her as a child. Growing up in the only ethnic family in a small Oklahoma town, Tsai would join her parents for the monthly trip to the Asian

grocery store about an hour and a half away. She watched her mother spend hours cooking traditional Taiwanese meals from scratch, using only the freshest vegetables and raw, natural ingredients. “My mom had the gift of foresight to understand the beauty of food,” Tsai said.

In contrast, the majority of today’s chocolate is mass-produced and requires moving large quantities of chocolate through enormous pipes.

“If you just stone-grind chocolate, it slows down like a beautiful waterfall. But it’s not necessarily going to flow through those pipes,” she said. “In order to get through the manufacturing facility’s production, you have to add additional oil.”

To prevent the oils and chocolate from separating, manufacturers must also use additives such as soy lecithin or polyglycerol polyricinoleate, known as PGPR.

“The more something is processed, the more you lose the integrity and the efficacy of that product,” Tsai said.

## **The Road To Refinement**

Tsai faced many hurdles while pursuing her passion, including from people who tried to discourage her from learning the traditional method of chocolate making. It took her five years to establish a direct relationship with a grower in Mexico and to figure out how to get the beans across the border affordably and efficiently. But her curiosity and determination kept her going and, in 2009, she introduced her first batch of chocolate at a farmers market.

Tsai branded her product **ChocoVivo**, which translates in Spanish to “live chocolate.” She soon expanded into eight different farmers markets, and by 2013, she created her own **storefront** to deliver an authentic chocolate experience to her customers.

“It was always my intent to have beverages,” Tsai said. “So when people said, ‘Do not go into retail,’ I went against their wishes because I knew I wanted to create a drinking experience to offer

that authenticity of how the Mayans enjoyed chocolate.”

In addition to her traditional chocolate beverages, Tsai offers other products that blend the ancient chocolate-making ritual with modern-day raw ingredients such as goji berries, hibiscus and dandelions. She also is introducing medicinal chocolate containing cannabis, chocolate bitters and chocolate teas. This creative experimentation is attracting clients who are not only looking not only for an authentic chocolate product, but also a truly bespoke experience.

“For me, there is an untapped story on chocolate,” Tsai explained. “I see myself as the storyteller who can tell a more precise story than anyone else in the chocolate industry, because I’m willing to take that extra step forward.”

*Heather Whitley is a senior-level writer and producer with a passion for storytelling. She has produced a wide variety of content for both television networks and digital platforms around the globe. Her work has been featured on multiple shows on CNN as well as ABC’s “20/20” and Gannett Digital’s websites.*