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FOOD & DRINK

Stone-Ground Chocolate Gets Hate Mail and Lots of Love

Fans of Taza Chocolate and Other Mexican-Style Chocolate Can't Get Enough of the Gritty, Earthy Treat



From left: Fruition Chocolate Rustic Crunch, \$8.95; Taza Cacao Nib Crunch bar and Cacao Puro disc, \$5 each; Madre Chocolate Likao Kula Gini Choobua bar, \$11; Peppalo Sea Salt, \$6. *PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, STYLING BY ANNE CARDENAS*

By **ALINA DIZIK**

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Craft chocolatiers are using ancient techniques of the Aztecs and Mayans to create a dairy-free, low-fat product with a consistency a bit like crunchy dirt. Some chocolate lovers can't seem to get enough of it.

This type of chocolate, sometimes called Mexican-style or stone-ground chocolate, is earthier, spicier and generally made with less sugar than sweet, creamy, European-style chocolate.

With Mexican-style chocolate, cocoa beans are roasted and shelled to yield edible cocoa-bean "nibs," which get ground into a coarse liquor and then mixed with sugar. Most makers temper the product, raising and lowering the temperature before pouring it into molds.

Grinding, often done with stone disks, is the crucial step that creates the characteristic texture.

"We are seeing this return to chocolate-making roots," says Carla Martin, a Harvard University lecturer in the department of African and African American Studies who specializes in the study of chocolate.



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Currently there are some 80 craft chocolate companies in the U.S., up from just a handful a decade ago, says Alex Whitmore, the 37-year-old co-founder of Taza Chocolate, a Somerville, Mass., maker of Mexican-style chocolate that keeps track of competitors.

Taza, which started making chocolate in 2006, was among the first U.S. companies to distribute stone-ground Mexican-inspired chocolate widely. It sells its signature discs (\$5 for 2.7 ounces) as well as Origin bars (\$7.50 for 3 ounces) and flavored Amaze bars (\$5 for 2.5 ounces).

The stone-ground texture, not the flavor, is most polarizing. Some people dislike the product and say it needs to be smooth, Mr. Whitmore says. The company gets the occasional piece of hate mail. But "a lot of people get hooked on the texture," he adds.

To introduce consumers to its chocolate and showcase how it is made, Taza offers as many as 30 visitor tours a week of its facility in Somerville, Mass.

Mexican-inspired chocolate sold in the U.S. isn't the same as chocolate made in Mexico, says Clay Gordon, the author of the 2007 book "Discover Chocolate" who runs a website for chocolate lovers and chocolate professionals. It also isn't necessarily darker than European-style chocolate. Cocoa content in the dark varieties of Mexican-style chocolate ranges from roughly 60% up to about 85%—about the same as many European-style dark chocolates.

In Mexico, stone-ground chocolate traditionally was combined with water and spices and consumed as a beverage, Mr. Gordon says. Craft chocolatiers' stone-ground chocolate, packaged in snack-sized bars, have become more common in the U.S. only within the past six years or so, he says. They are still sold mainly directly by the makers and in specialty food outlets.

Technically, Mr. Gordon says, "there's really no such thing as Mexican-style eating chocolate. You're not supposed to eat it."

Though most stone-ground chocolate adds sugar, it doesn't typically add cocoa butter, yielding a less-processed product than what European-style chocolatiers make with conching machines, which knead chocolate to create an evenly blended bar.

That is a major reason stone-ground chocolate has become popular with young entrepreneurs: It doesn't rely on pricey refining equipment, says Nat Bletter, co-founder of Madre Chocolate, a stone-ground chocolate maker based in Honolulu.

When Dr. Bletter first tried making stone-ground chocolate eight years ago, he used a coffee grinder and a food processor in his kitchen. Two years ago, Madre introduced a bean-to-bar home chocolate-making kit for \$24.80, which consumers can use to make chocolate with standard kitchen equipment.

Many first-timers are taken aback by the flavor and texture of Mexican-style chocolate. Marketers find it is worth offering a few words of warning before someone has a first bite. Erika Aylward, the 41-year-old co-founder of Peppalo chocolate, based in Tecumseh, Mich., often hands out samples so people can try before they buy.

“People have eaten Hershey’s all their life, and it’s just too difficult for them to comprehend,” Ms. Aylward says.

Coarse-ground chocolate tends to be softer and to melt instantly in the mouth. The flavor lingers, making it a useful savory cooking ingredient, makers says. Peppalo makes a cold-smoked chocolate with an umami flavor, and consumers often use it to flavor grilled pork chops or baked beans, Ms. Aylward says.

Andy Ellis, a 42-year-old technology security executive living in Medford, Mass., is a convert to coarse-ground chocolate, ever since he tried it five years ago. He has been stashing round disks of Taza chocolate in his office and brings it in his backpack, along with beef jerky, on work trips, in case hunger strikes.

“There’s an extra crunch that surprises you,” Mr. Ellis says. “It was almost more like having a potato chip.”

Another aspect of the appeal is *terroir*, a concept stone-ground chocolate has in common with wine and coffee. Many chocolate makers use cocoa beans from a single country or region and promote the origins.

Cocoa beans from the Dominican Republic tend to have citrus and blood-orange notes, Dr. Martin says, and beans from Madagascar have plum and berry notes.

At Madre Chocolate, Dr. Bletter adds traditional Mexican-inspired ingredients such as achiote shrubs, plumeria flowers and *rosita de cacao* flowers (which aren’t related to cocoa beans) to the chocolate.

Rather than add ingredients with shock value, such as kimchi or bacon, “we take inspiration from the people who started chocolate,” Dr. Bletter says.

Madre sells a “drinking bar” of chocolate, Chocolate de Mesa, with vanilla beans and allspice. Traditionally it is melted with hot water, not milk, to create a richer beverage than from powdered cocoa, Dr. Bletter says. The drinking bar costs \$7.75 and yields six cups. “We are trying to introduce people to how chocolate was originally consumed,” he says.

Olive & Sinclair, a six-year-old Nashville company, sells a Mexican-style chocolate bar flavored with cinnamon and cayenne pepper, with a recipe for turning the bar into a drink on the back. Taza sells a traditional wooden whisk called a *molinillo* (moh-lee-NEE-yo) to froth a cup of hot chocolate.

Last year, Patricia Tsai, 38, opened ChocoVivo, a Los Angeles cafe and factory, after selling her chocolate in farmers markets. Patrons can order a “flight” of 11 single-origin chocolates, similar to the series of small cups presented at wine and beer tastings. The Mayan Warrior, a hot-chocolate drink, is made from cocoa nibs and water with no added sugar; other drinks are customized blends of sweet and bitter flavors. “It’s not for people with a super-sweet tooth,” Ms. Tsai says.

Corrections & Amplifications

An earlier version reversed information about price and size for two of Taza Chocolate’s products, the Amaze and Origin bars. (Jan. 14, 2015)

Write to Alina Dizik at alina.dizik@wsj.com

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