



PROFILE

honest to goodness

They're pretty as a picture, with an assortment of flavours that will have you hovering over the box for far too long. As a beautiful bonus, Honest Chocolat's bonbons are dairy and palm oil free, and made using the highest-quality, sustainably produced cocoa.

Story — ALICE GALLETLY / Photography — JESSIE CASSON

To look at one of Nico Bonnaud's luxurious bonbons, some of which are hand-painted in gold or flecked with white edible paint so they resemble a starry night sky, it's easy to forget that chocolate grows on trees. But once you take a bite – cracking through the shell to reveal a velvety ganache filling – you can taste it: the fruity, earthy flavour of the humble cocoa bean.



THESE PAGES: Lovingly handmade and delicately decorated, Honest Chocolat now has six new flavours of chocolate bonbons on the menu. For the festive season, there's a special Christmas packaging available with boxes of six or three and a Christmas flavour chocolate tablet joining the selection too.



"My philosophy is that chocolate should be made of chocolate products and very little else," explains Nico when I meet him and his wife, Emily, at their Snells Beach home. "In a way, single origin chocolate is like wine – depending on the type of bean that's used, the soil it's grown in and the way in which it's harvested, there are completely different flavour profiles that come through. My goal is to showcase those flavours in the best way possible."

Whatever Nico's philosophy on chocolate is, I would be inclined to believe in it. For one, he is French, which automatically lends weight to any of his opinions on food. Perhaps more significantly, his 18-year career as a top level pastry chef has seen him travelling the world and working in some of the world's best kitchens, including French master chef Pierre Gagnaire's Sketch in London, where he

headed a team of 11. Add to that fine dining restaurants in France and the US, our own Kauri Cliffs, The Sugar Club and Little Bird Unbakery, and you have to believe the man knows what he's talking about.

For now at least, the fine dining kitchens and travelling are behind him, for he and Emily are happily settled in Auckland (Emily is from the UK, but they both prefer living in New Zealand to their respective homes), and six-months deep into a new venture.

Honest Chocolat, which they run out of a commercial kitchen they built in their garage, is the culmination of Nico's experience as a pastry chef as well as a lifelong love of chocolate. "Chocolate is a big passion of mine," he explains. "Growing up in France, we always had a box of chocolates in our cupboards – and by chocolate I mean chocolate from real chocolatiers. It might sound a bit posh, but

that's what French people are like. They go to the bakery for bread, the pâtisserie for pastry, the chocolatier for chocolate..."

For Nico, it was important that Honest Chocolat products stand out from the crowd. First and foremost, that means using the highest quality chocolate available – theirs is 70 per cent cacao, grown using sustainable methods in the Virunga National Park in the Congo. It's organic, fair-trade, single-origin... everything you'd expect from an artisan chocolate nowadays.

The big thing that sets it apart, however, is the way Nico uses it. Unlike most ganache, which is traditionally made from chocolate and cream, Nico's makes his with chocolate and water, which means the bonbons are vegan.

"With the water ganache you get more of the original flavour of the chocolate, which has very distinctive flavours from the soil and the

bean," Nico explains. "The end result is very clean. There's a freshness coming through, it's not coating the tongue and the palate as much as a traditional bonbon. And it's not as sweet because we add minimal sugar to it."

If it sounds a bit worthy, don't worry. They promise me the decision to omit cream and large amounts of sugar has nothing to do with being trendy and everything to do with taste. And they do taste incredible, I can attest to that – rich yet light and flavourful, without that harsh sourness you often get from chocolate with a high cacao percentage (this, they say, is thanks to the quality of the chocolate). My favourite is a delicately perfumed lychee and rosewater bonbon, or possibly the blood orange and smoky black cardamom. Maybe the toasted fennel seed? I'll have to try them again and come back to you.

Incredibly, I don't feel a bit sick after

scoffing five chocolates, which I put down to the water ganache. "It's the healthiest kind of chocolate you can get because you're not getting cream and butter," Nico explains. "Not that I'm against dairy at all – I'm Frenchman so of course I love cheese."

Apparently there's a secret to mixing water and chocolate successfully, but Nico isn't about to give it away. "Even I don't know what it is", Emily admits. It's not that I'm banned from the room, just that it's so complicated." Emily, who works as an interior designer, says she isn't the type of cook to follow a recipe. Instead, she lends her design skills to Honest Chocolat's packaging and branding.

"We're a real team. We both have a love for good food, and from the moment we met we started talking about having our own cafe or restaurant one day. It's ended up being a chocolate business, which is great because it

combines both our skills and experience."

So far, they say the chocolates have had a great reception. On top of online orders, they sell to a few specialty stores and restaurants – including Peter Gordon's Auckland restaurant, The Sugar Club – have a weekend stall at the La Cigale French Market and provide chocolate for special events and weddings.

And what about the name, Honest Chocolat? For Nico and Emily, this means using only natural products and no hidden preservatives, enhancers or additives. Most importantly, it means no palm oil, which, they say, is often used in chocolate as a cheap alternative to cocoa butter.

"It's usually listed as confectioner's fat or vegetable oil. We think that's unfair to consumers because they should be able to know what they're buying and make the choice for themselves," Nico says.

The pair became wise to the negative environmental impacts of palm oil when they took a trip to Borneo in 2010, where they learned of the devastating effects on local wildlife and communities caused by palm oil production.

In their own efforts for total transparency, they admit they initially went a bit too far with labelling. "We listed the exact percentages of every single ingredient," laughs Emily. "The food safety inspectors pointed out that people could actually steal our recipe."

I don't think it really would have mattered, somehow. Having the ingredients is one thing, knowing what to do with them is another. Until someone can figure out Nico's secret method, it's the only thing Honest Chocolat has to hide. ☺