

PASSPORT TO *Indulgence*

Columbia, Madagascar or Ecuador, the average bar of chocolate might begin life in a far-away rainforest, but in London, one chocolatier is turning her attention and sweet tooth back to the source. **Lauren Romano** meets Amelia Rope

Easter: a time to decapitate bunnies, nibble nests and smash hollow hens to smithereens – all of the chocolate variety, of course. While the rest of us unwrap foil-covered treats, however, chocolatier Amelia Rope has other eggs to fry. Not content with simply devising new recipes from her London home, Amelia's fascination with the origins of chocolate and the journey from bean to bar has taken her to the cocoa plantations of Columbia where she has set her sights on a new project.

The leap from London, where Amelia Rope Chocolate was founded in 2007, to South America nearly didn't happen at all. Although founding a chocolate business might appear to be a shrewd career move for a self-confessed chocoholic, Amelia was reluctant to make chocolate bars. 'In the beginning, I focused on producing handmade truffles and crystallised flora, I didn't want to go down the chocolate bar route as I thought it was too predictable,' she tells me over a stack of her beautifully hand-wrapped, colourfully foiled bars.

In fact, it wasn't until Amelia's good friend and mentor Pat Reeves, the co-founder of *sofa.com*, placed a mammoth order of 1,000 chocolate bars in November 2009 that she caved. 'Pat had an instinct for

business and he always knew I was doing the wrong thing. He also knew I couldn't afford to turn down such a big order, so I had six weeks to make 1,000 chocolate bars!' she recalls fondly. 'He even paid me in another 1,000 chocolate bars, which I went on to sell and that's how things began.'

With 1,000 chocolate bars on her hands, it wasn't long before Amelia began to approach local delis. Bayley & Sage on the New King's Road (or Elizabeth King as it was then known) was the first place to sell the bars and it remains a stockist. Then a buyer for Selfridges got wind of Amelia's

chocolate bars and the store became the first major retailer to stock them. 'That was when I

knew that I had a brand and a product,' she reveals. From there, Amelia peddled her imaginatively flavoured wares to the likes of Liberty and Whole Foods, where you will spy her sweet treats on the shelves at the new Fulham branch when it opens in April.

The early days were of course not without their trials and tribulations – not least the small matter of wrapping all orders by hand and even (in the very early days) hand-signing and marking each bar with an edition number. But having painstakingly established her business over here, Amelia's conscience was pulling her in another direction. 'I was recently invited to visit

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cocoa growers in Columbia. In many respects Columbia is the underdog of the chocolate world, trailing behind more popular sourcing locations in Madagascar, Tanzania and Ecuador, but it was the most inspirational place to visit,' Amelia beams. 'What people are striving to achieve over there with zero resources is just staggering.'

During her time in Columbia, Amelia was introduced to a Swiss charity that is helping to supply man power, rather than money, to plantation owners. 'The charity is teaching people how to maximise their sustainability and create fine couverture [a type of very high-quality chocolate that contains extra cocoa butter, I learn] ready to export,' Amelia elaborates. 'It is trying to persuade them through education that it is more viable in the long term to grow cocoa not cocaine, which of course, there is still a big market for over there.' Amelia was so inspired by her visit and the stories of the plantation owners that she met that she is hoping to commission a short film and a TV documentary on chocolate production in the country. 'I think it is important that we don't lose the root of where chocolate comes from,' she says.

Back at home, the chocolatier remains uncompromising on quality, purity and taste. 'I work with sustainably sourced and fairly traded couverture, which I melt, temper, remould and flavour. It's incredible how many well-known brands compromise on the quality of their ingredients and compensate with fancy packaging,' she confides as we nibble on zingy slabs of a lime and sea salt-infused sensation. 'I strive for quality inside and out. People want a Rolls-Royce of a chocolate bar for pennies and that just isn't realistic as the price of cocoa is always going up.'

Despite pressure to keep costs down, Amelia remains faithful to her use of



only single origin chocolate, a decision no doubt which led to her invitation to join the committee at the Academy of Chocolate. Here, fellow members and behemoths of the industry, Chantal Coady of Rococo and Marc Demarquette, are also united in their passion for fine chocolate and strive to promote the origins and ethics behind its production. The ever-ambitious Amelia also hopes to one day build an education foundation to educate and promote links between cocoa producing countries and chocolate consuming ones. 'One step at a time, however!' she chides.

In the meantime, Amelia is working hard to develop her forthcoming collection. As I take a third bite of a white chocolate, pistachio and sea salt taste revelation, she lets slip that good-quality chocolate, as opposed to cheap, highly processed equivalents, leaves you with a clean palate and stops you craving more. A square a day keeps the doctor away, so to speak. Now there's an adage I like the sound of. ■

Amelia Rope Chocolate is available locally at Bayley & Sage, Whole Foods or online at ameliarope.com. For more information on how you can get involved with Amelia's film project email amelia@ameliarope.com

