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The World's Best Chocolate

After trying a chocolate so good it leaves him speechless, Pete Wells goes on an urgent tasting mission to cult Tuscan chocolatier Amedei.

By **Pete Wells**

Late last year, I grew curious about an Italian chocolate brand called Amedei. I mean curious in the same sense that sharks are curious about surfers. Amedei, founded in 1990, is the joint project of a 42-year-old Italian named Alessio Tessieri and his younger sister, Cecilia; he buys the cacao and she turns it into dark, glossy bars. In November, a competition in London awarded a gold prize to one of Cecilia's handiworks, a single-plantation chocolate called Chuao. Two other Amedei products tied for silver.

Both the visionary French pâtissier Pierre Hermé and the visionary Spanish chef Ferran Adrià have said that Chuao might, in fact, be the world's greatest chocolate. And yet Amedei is sold in only a handful of stores in the U.S., and—while a new importer has big plans for the brand—few Americans have heard of it.

How had the Tessieris vaulted from obscurity to produce chocolate in the same rarefied league as Cluizel, Scharffenberger and even the mighty Valrhona? And, more urgently, where could I get some?

The second question had an easy answer: Chocosphere, World Wide Chocolate and other very handy Web sites for people who care about cacao content. A carton from Chocosphere containing just over a half pound of Amedei bars and squares ran me \$50, with shipping. The next day, the whole box was gone. In my defense, I've seen engagement rings that came in bigger boxes. I knew that I wanted more, but at \$100 a pound it would be cheaper to fly to Italy and go to the factory myself, which is what I did. This might make me the first traveler in history who went to Tuscany to save money on a candy bar.

The Tessieris work about 40 miles west of Florence, close to the Arno, and not far from Pisa; the Italian wine and food magazine *Gambero Rosso* has called this region the Chocolate Valley because of the concentration of chocolatiers who work there—among them Paul de Bondt, Roberto Catinari and Luca Mannori. The Chocolate Valley is not nearly as famous as other parts of Tuscany. For me, this only increased its allure. While other tourists inched through the vineyards of Chianti staring at the exhaust pipe of the rental car just ahead, I would be lazily bobbing along in a rowboat, dipping pieces of bread over the side into the world's biggest fondue.

Amedei sits just outside Pontedera, where they build those stylish Vespa scooters that make even old Italians look young. Amedei's factory, a low brick structure, used to be an iron foundry. Alessio and Cecilia met me inside a tasting room, where a table was set with linen tablecloths and silver chargers. Two large jars were prominently displayed; filled with what looked like water, each held a large, red, heart-shaped object. Cecilia wore a severe suit of charcoal gray, a no-nonsense

expression, and a red scarf; the factory was cold that day. Alessio's face was round and rosy, and his rimless eyeglasses made him look more like a graduate student than a chocolate baron.

Trying to make small talk, I mentioned hearing that there were many other chocolate makers nearby.

Alessio shook his head. "But those other companies do not make chocolate," he replied. "They buy it."

In the lofty strata where Tessieri operates, "making chocolate" means that you *make* the chocolate. You import cacao beans from plantations. You roast them and husk them and grind the cacao nibs into a fine paste. You add sugar and grind some more. Finally you swirl the mixture in open tanks called conches, which smooths the texture while helping to blow off acids and other nasty flavors. It's complicated, demanding work, and few small companies even attempt it.

Cecilia asked me to put on a hairnet, a plastic jacket and disposable blue booties, then led me downstairs to the factory. The machines, Swiss, Italian and German models painted ivory, clacked and hammered away, sounding like an orchestra of conga drums. A young guy with tattooed forearms strained to push sweetened cacao paste through a screen with a paddle. For some reason, the floor was painted blood red. The chocolate smell was so strong and pure I could barely think. Somehow I managed to remark to Alessio that these antique machines must limit the quantity of chocolate Amedei can make.

"The problem is not the machines," he said. "The problem is cacao. We can't find enough good cacao." Only by starting with prime cacao, he explained, can you achieve the quality and character that set Amedei apart from the candy makers, who buy bulk chocolate.

"Everyone said, why do you want to work so hard and invest in machinery?" Alessio explained. "Everyone said to make chocolate, you need to produce tons, not kilos. But this was a desire to do something unique."

But that wasn't the Tessieris' only desire. When we simply love something we eat, it's natural to imagine that it was made from the same simple love. And often we're right, but the motives that drive people to work as hard as Alessio and Cecilia can sometimes be a little more complicated.

The Tessieris did not set out to make chocolate. In the beginning, like the rest of the Chocolate Valley, they made candy. Their parents owned a business in Pontedera that sold pastry ingredients to bakers. Alessio and Cecilia went off on their own, but they didn't stray far. They rented a small room in town and began to experiment with what they call pralines and we call filled chocolates. Soon enough, they wanted to move to a higher grade—the highest grade they knew. So the brother and sister, who were still in their 20s, went to visit a chocolate maker they greatly admired.

In 1991, Alessio and Cecilia made a pilgrimage to Tain l'Hermitage, in the Rhône Valley, for an appointment at Valrhona. The Tessieris were humored for a while, but when they were ready to make a deal, they were sent away with nothing. The French wouldn't even negotiate. According to Cecilia, they were told that Italy wasn't evolved enough to appreciate such extraordinary chocolate.

It was a personal slight, a national insult, a call to arms. "Right then and there," Cecilia would later say, "it was war."

Chloé Doutre-Roussel, the author of *The Chocolate Connoisseur* and one of the world's leading authorities on fine chocolate, uses another word to describe what came next: vendetta. "Everything Alessio does, he does with intensity," Doutre-Roussel says. "So this revenge became his focus. He put everything—the family money, even his sister—on this project."

Within three weeks, the Tessieris decided that they weren't going to buy chocolate anymore—they would make it. Cecilia apprenticed with bean-to-bar artisans around Europe. At first they bought cacao from brokers, but by 1997, Alessio had begun hunting it himself, from Ecuador to Madagascar to the Caribbean coast of Venezuela. This last region was especially rich with cacao of the first rank; a lot of money was at stake, and life could get rough. Four years ago, someone tried to murder a cacao buyer who worked with Valrhona, strafing his car with an automatic weapon and leaving him with a half-dozen gunshot wounds.

The most famous Venezuelan cacao of all comes from Chuao. The trees of Chuao are shielded by mountains from all but the warm Caribbean breezes; the soil is naturally irrigated by three cascading rivers. Doutre-Roussel calls the region "one of the jewels of the earth." Besides the microclimate, Chuao has centuries-old traditions of harvesting and preparing cacao. First it's fermented to develop the compounds that will later blossom into rich aromatics, then it's laid out on the parvis in front of the village church to dry slowly in the sun. Because the farmers worked together as a cooperative, Chuao is one of the only places where a chocolate maker could buy, at one stroke, 9 to 10 tons of uniformly excellent cacao. Until recently, that chocolate maker was Valrhona. Today every last kilo of cacao from Chuao goes to Amedei.

Alessio went around to the brokers and negotiated directly with the farmers' cooperative, offering to pay off their debts and triple the previous price for their beans. "By the time Valrhona realized, it was gone," Doutre-Roussel says.

Cecilia transforms the beans of Chuao into chocolate that packs a sensory wallop I tend to remember for weeks. It's very aromatic, with a clarity and elegance more often found in wine and some single malts. One bar retails for just under nine dollars. Chuao represents just a fraction of Amedei's total output, yet it has made the Tessieris famous.

The story of how Amedei eloped with Chuao and sent the wedding pictures to Tain l'Hermitage isn't exactly a vision of sugar plums, but the chocolate industry has a long history of wars, most of them far more brutal. Steve DeVries, a bean-to-bar chocolate maker from Denver, used to say that the Spanish arrived in Mexico and threatened, "Give us your cacao or we'll shoot you." Hunting beans in Mexico, DeVries repeated the remark to an anthropologist. "No, no, no," the anthropologist said. "Before that, the Aztecs came down and said 'Give us your cacao or we'll cut your hearts out.'"

Even today, the chocolate trade looks a lot like it did in colonial days: Raw materials bought at generally low prices in the tropics are shipped to the developed world and turned into a luxury product. Today, three of the largest importers of cacao to America are fighting a lawsuit filed by a human rights group claiming that they buy beans harvested by child slaves, mostly in the nation of Ivory Coast. Several journalists have contended that the extent of slavery in the cacao industry has been overblown, but it's hardly comforting to hear that the number of slaves who helped make your afternoon snack has been exaggerated. Without doubt, adults and children on some cacao farms, particularly in West Africa, perform demanding, exhausting work for awful pay.

Most chocolate makers know nothing about where their cacao comes from. A former consultant for a well-regarded European chocolate maker told me that until last year, the firm's cacao buyer had never been to a plantation. Farmers sell to brokers who sell to bigger brokers; by the time the cacao reaches the factory, nobody knows its story. Sometimes this arrangement allows growers to mistreat workers without accountability. It also can allow them to get the same price for unripe, rotting or generally trashy beans—at their worst, these are known as "dogs and cats"—that they get for the good stuff.

"We became convinced it was impossible to become number one in the world buying beans from brokers," Alessio says. "The broker cannot tell you who grew the beans, or how it was done." I don't take Alessio for a weepy humanitarian, and yet he practices enlightened self-interest when it comes to the people who grow his cacao. He has invested in Chuao, agreeing to pay off the farmers' mounting debts and buying baseball uniforms for the local team. He needs their best work so that he and Cecilia can do their best work.

Back upstairs in the room marked Degustazione, I stripped off my shower cap and booties and sat down across the table from Cecilia. For a long time, neither of us spoke.

"So," Cecilia finally said. "You want to try the chocolate?"

She walked to the sideboard and pulled down three trays, each arrayed with a different *cru*. Valrhona was the first to borrow that wine term and apply it to chocolate; Amadei uses it to describe bars made with beans from the same region. Amadei's Grenada I Cru was quiet and had something about it that reminded me of raspberries. The Jamaica was stronger and made me think of pipe tobacco; so did the Venezuela, but it also had a durable aftertaste of good black coffee. Then Cecilia offered me a tray of the first chocolate she made, called Toscano Black 70 percent. This time, I had trouble picking individual voices out of the choir. I mostly remember the overall sensation of getting all the deliciousness any sane person could want.

All the while, I'd been looking at the red heart-shaped objects that were floating in the two big jars. I kept thinking about the Aztecs. At last I asked Alessio what they were. "Cacao pods," he said. "In formaldehyde so they do not dry up." The one off in a corner behind the door was a unique Venezuelan variety called Porcelana. The other, placed on a low table next to all the trays of chocolate, gleamed and glistened like a trophy. That one was Venezuelan too, Alessio said with a smile. It came from Chuao.

Pete Wells is a contributing editor to *Food & Wine*. E-mail comments to him at pete.is.hungry@gmail.com.

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