



## Heaven - on four squares a day

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**A return to the fine flavours enjoyed by the Aztecs is revolutionising our expectations of chocolate, says Tom Leonard**

It's the smell that hits you first. A deep, heavenly aroma that differs but subtly in each of the rooms we pass through.

Everywhere, liquid chocolate dribbles down chutes and collects in trays. In the conching machine room, where melted chocolate is massaged for 72 hours, I have an Augustus Gloop moment.

My guide lifts the lid on one of the contraptions to reveal 100 kilograms of molten Jamaican chocolate being swished gently around by a huge stone roller. She lets me peer inside. Has anyone ever fallen in? No, says my guide, but then they no longer allow school children to visit because it's "too dangerous".



Before eating: sniff, examine the look and "snap", the "mouth feel"

British chocolate connoisseurs had warned me that Amedei, makers of what many regard as the world's finest chocolate, rarely allow visitors beyond the elegant tasting room into the small factory beyond.

But like the lucky winners of the Wonka gold bars, after convincing the management that we had more serious intentions than dipping our fingers in a molten chocolate vat, The Daily Telegraph was this week ushered through the gates of the converted iron works, near Pontedera in the hills outside Pisa, to enter one of the high temples of a new cult.

When it comes to chocolate, what you need to understand is that less is more. And better you understand that now rather than wait a few days, when that queasy feeling of Easter over-indulgence sets in.

The once noble bean, the favourite food and supposedly aphrodisiac of the Aztec emperors, is undergoing a quiet renaissance.

In the forests of central and South America, growers are discovering long forgotten, tastier cocoa bean varieties, while in London, New York and Paris, connoisseurs gather at wine tasting-style evenings to sample the fruits of this harvest.

The language may seem familiar: Hints of tobacco and leather "new shoe" notes? Hmmm, yes, but would it be impertinent to add "chocolatey", too?

Apparently it would not. Fine chocolate (most of it dark and defined as having high cocoa content, made with cocoa butter rather than vegetable fat and free from artificial additives) has almost as many flavours (300) as fine wines. But, then, they are influenced by the same factors - climate, soil, crop variety and harvesting methods.

Forget the likes of Green & Black, the organic chocolate maker recently bought by Cadbury, and expensive chocs simply marked "Belgian" - the buzzword among the real chocolate cognoscenti is

whether a chocolate is "single source" or not - has it come from a single plantation or bean variety?

Like so many areas of food production, chocolate is trying to rediscover its roots, in particular the superior tasting criollo beans cultivated by the Aztecs and Mayans.

But there are few left, most having been grubbed out decades ago by farmers in favour of the hybrid forastero beans. These don't taste as good but the big chocolate manufacturers like them as they are hardier and produce a far higher yield.

As a result we have all grown up with poor-quality chocolate, low in cocoa content but high in vegetable fat, artificial flavourings and sugar.

And this is where the less is more principle comes in. The sugar is added to mask the bitter aftertaste from inferior beans and over-roasting, say the fine chocolateers.

With good quality chocolate, you need less fattening sugar and you get a pleasant long-lingering aftertaste rather than the metallic one in cheap bars that actually makes you want to keep eating to get rid of it.

According to chocolate experts, two small squares twice a day of the good stuff is more than enough.

It's certainly a good time to be arguing that chocolate should be made healthier. There is growing medical evidence that dark - high cocoa content - chocolate has significant health benefits, particularly that its anti-oxidant flavonoid molecules can prevent clotting. This week it was announced that heart patients at a London hospital may be receiving chocolate as part of their medication.

That doesn't surprise Alessio and Cecilia Tessieri - Amedei's Willie Wonka is a brother and sister double act - who set up the chocolate company in 1990. Alessio travels the world finding the best plantations, establishing good relations with farmers, and has the beans sent back to his sister.

Cecilia, Europe's only female master chocolate maker, supervises production and, hidden away in her laboratory, slits open helpless beans with a hand-held guillotine and conducts devilishly clever experiments to devise new recipes.

Being a woman in a man's industry has been crucial to her success, Cecilia, 39, believes. "Ladies have a different sensibility, a different approach to the ingredients. I prepare my chocolate with the same patience I show to my two sons."

How much does she eat each day? Typically no more than three small squares, she says. The cocoa solids content of her chocolate is between 63 and 75 per cent (compared to 20 per cent in Dairy Milk or 39 per cent in Bourneville).

The factory's 20 white-coated staff circulate around the huge Heath Robinson-style roasting, shelling, grinding, stirring and melting machines - 70-year-old equipment that Amedei acquired from big manufacturers who have switched to full automation.

"We're not an industry but an artisanal laboratory," says Alessio.

The price of cocoa has fallen dramatically in the past 20 years, he explains, prompting poor farmers to cut corners in the crucial stages of fermenting and drying the beans. He pays farmers six or seven times the market rate and visits them four times a year so he can supervise them singly.

No big company could do this, he says. "As with olive oil, you cannot produce high quality in large quantities. You cannot manage 10,000 farmers and tell each of them exactly what you want."

Martin Christy, the founder of Seventypercent.com, a British chocolate connoisseur club agrees and is evangelical in his efforts to spread the word about fine chocolate.

This week, in the upstairs room of a restaurant in Pimlico in south-west London, 16 people, most of them professional types, gather around a large table at a monthly tasting evening held by the group. Ten chocolates from makers such as Valrhona, Amedei and Domori (a Genoa company which is the other darling of the fine chocolate world) are on offer.

Some of his guests are fine chocolate virgins and, as a plate of each new variety is passed round, forget - like me - to sniff first and then bite delicately. But then after years of just wolfing down chocolate, I also keep forgetting Christy's other tasting tips - to examine the look and "snap", and the "mouth feel".

Not to worry though. Steve Chung, Seventypercent's co-founder, says that even among fine chocolates, some are made to savour lingeringly on the palette, others to munch, he says.

While fine chocolate has borrowed the language of fine wine, Christy and Chung want to avoid the latter's snobbery. "Ultimately it's down to personal taste. We want people to be free to express what they think," says Chung.

Sure enough, while the tasting notes suggest flavours such as leather and watermelon, the only observations that some of us amateurs can manage are "buttery" and "chocolatey". Christy also offers us some buying tips - that "Belgian chocolate" is a marketing ploy, that "fair trade" doesn't necessarily mean good quality and that organic often means that they have used the inferior but hardier hybrid cocoa varieties.

Sarah Welfoot says she doesn't really like chocolate but has brought her boyfriend, Andy James, who does, to the evening in lieu of an Easter egg.

Both were going back to Watford impressed by what they had learnt. "You certainly come away thinking you'll think more the next time you buy it," he says, while she adds: "It would be a perfect end for a meal to go away with this taste in your mouth."

Peter Heywood, a management consultant, points out that changing how you eat chocolate seems to be important. "If you wanted to trade up in chocolate you wouldn't want to eat so much. You'd want to build in the ritual - just as you do with wine."

Martin Christy says the fine chocolate movement is part of the general move to look to the source of food, beyond the modern industrial processes of the Cadbury's and Nestle's.

"I almost feel we've been cheated," he says. "It's impossible for the big chocolate companies to control their product so they control our taste instead. Most of the chocolates here tonight are made by manufacturers no more than four years old. Until very recently nobody got to taste anything as good as this."

So now you know. Happy Easter!