How do I becomeâ€¦ a chocolate taster?

Description

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As a follow up to: â€œLife as a Chocolate Tasterâ€•. Youâ€™ll need a relevant background, whether in chemistry or something culinary, and a sweet tooth wouldnâ€™t go amiss either.

Cat Channon has never forgotten her first taste of Cadburyâ€™s chocolate. â€œI must have been two years old. Cadburyâ€™s Buttons were Mumâ€™s â€˜little treatâ€™ and she gave some to me. I have a strong memory of sitting with her, savouring each and every one.â€• Little did she know the experience would mark the start of her career as a master chocolate taster, product developer and laboratory scientist for Mondelez (formerly Kraft Foods), which now manufactures Cadburyâ€™s chocolate. â€œI studied chemistry at Warwick University and started looking for lab work when I graduated. I leapt at the opportunity to work here. I was 22 years old, and so keen in the interview I told them they could pay me in chocolate!â€•

Instead, she was offered Â£7.50 an hour to work in the Bourneville factory analytical lab, testing caramel. â€œMost of the tests involve heating it up. So you sit in this room that smells nicely of warm caramel, and you have to make sure itâ€™s not runnier or thicker than the specifications, and that it doesnâ€™t have an odd taste.â€• That is where her degree â€“ rather than her love of chocolate â€“ made all the difference: â€œYou need to be able to analyse the caramel to make sure it wonâ€™t go off and has been made to the recipe, so for example, Iâ€™d conduct moisture testing to analyse the amount of water in the product and conduct viscosity tests to see how runny it was.â€•

Chocolate, she says, is surprisingly hard to work with. â€œItâ€™s very temperamental, because youâ€™re using a blend of fat as well as cocoa. The amount of time you spend conching â€“ mixing all the ingredients together â€“ is crucial, because the more you blend a mixture, the more you release the flavours.â€•

Itâ€™s obvious that for Channon, making chocolate taste delicious is an scientific pursuit, affected by variables like the climate of the region the cocoa beans were grown in, how the beans were dried (over a fire or in the sun), the amount of sugar you put in, and â€œhow the chocolate moves around in your mouthâ€•. This is where the viscosity of the mixture comes into play: â€œDuring the mixing process, the more you grind down the dry ingredients and the smaller you get the little particles, the thicker the chocolate becomes and the finer it tastes in the mouth.â€•

The luckiest break of her career came, she says, when she was offered the opportunity to move across from the analytical lab to the research and development team. Here, many of her colleagues have trained as chefs, rather than scientists. â€œIf youâ€™re working on something like Marvellous Creations [a new bar, varieties of which are filled with jellies and popping candy], where youâ€™re interested in which flavours are exciting right now, you need to take more of a food-based approach. But if youâ€™re doing something like creating a new chocolate recipe or a new filling recipe, or looking at how you can aerate a chocolate bar to make it bubbly, then a chemistry background becomes very important.â€•

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Just three years after starting her first job in the analytical lab, Channon is leading her own R&D project developing new products. The role, which typically pays between Â£24,000 and Â£30,000, necessitates that she spend at least 10% to 20% of her time tasting chocolate. â€œThe marketing team will come up with a concept for a new product â€“ for example, for Marvellous Creations, it was

something fun, that families can share, thatâ€™s different â€“ and it is our job, in R&D, to bring those ideas to life. Weâ€™ll look to stretch the product briefs as much as possible, and that means making different samples and tasting them to discover what we do and donâ€™t like.â€• The samples are then tested consumers to find out which they like best. â€œAfter that, we speak to engineers who know about the manufacturing and packaging process, as well as the marketing and legal team, to find out which are possible, which are expensive and which are the most exciting,â€• she says. â€œThen we pick the best idea from that and look at how we can make it even better.â€•

Her current project means she is spending â€œa fair amount of timeâ€• eating Cadburyâ€™s Dairy Milk (there are piles of â€œCDMâ€•, as she calls it, on her desk) and thinking about how the different flavours, textures and ingredients in a piece of chocolate will come to you at different points: â€œYou have to know your product. Youâ€™re always building on whatâ€™s already been on the market.â€•

The biggest challenge of her job is coming up with a new chocolate recipe that will appeal to â€“ and can be manufactured for â€“ Mondelezâ€™s massive global audience. â€œYou can spend six months creating the most wonderful product thatâ€™s absolutely delicious, but you canâ€™t make it in the factory, or you canâ€™t package it, or itâ€™s not kosher or suitable for vegetarians.â€•

This does not stop Channon from tasting and experimenting with an open mind: â€œI think itâ€™s better to go wild and create the best product you can, and then take a step back and think about the regulations and restrictions. Because maybe they will lift or you will find a way to do it.â€•

As one of the companyâ€™s 50 official chocolate tasters, she also attends regular tasting sessions to evaluate different aspects of the products that the R&D team is working on. For Cat, the biggest downside of eating so much chocolate at work is that â€œyou lose the ability to just pop a piece of chocolate in your mouth. Youâ€™re always thinking: Why has it been developed like this?â€• Plus, chocolate bought from the shops tastes less fresh than Channon has become accustomed to. â€œWe get samples straight off the line that are just a few hours old.â€•

If that hasnâ€™t put you off, Channon has advice for budding tasters. â€œIt helps to have a relevant background, whether thatâ€™s in chemistry, engineering or something culinary, and experience in product development,â€• she says. Mondelez offers year-long industrial placements to undergraduates, as well as shorter internships, and this sort of hands-on experience helps an applicant stand out from the crowd. â€œMy advice to anyone starting out is to try to get as much relevant experience as you can. Write to local companies that will offer you work experience in the industry â€“ volunteer if necessary â‰ but find a way to be part of that business.â€•

To succeed you need to learn quickly, and have a passion for projects. â€œYou need to feel constantly pushed to improve a product, without anyone telling you to make it taste better. You also need to be able to think about things in an organised way. Generally, youâ€™re working on a lot of different aspects of a product at once; thereâ€™s a lot of project management and balancing involved.â€•

Finally, if you want a job as a chocolate taster, thereâ€™s one last quality thatâ€™s absolutely essential, says Channon: â€œYou need to love chocolate.â€•

Donna Ferguson

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