The Rise of the Chocolate Snob

Description

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First it was wine lovers, then the Aeropress-wielding coffee fans. Ahead of the Valentineâ€™s chocolate feast, our reporter discovers a new breed of devotees.
Wine snobbery has been with us for as long as thereâ€™s been champagne to covet and iconic vineyards to revere. Coffee snobbery is a more modern phenomenon, the affliction of which seems related to either beard size or capsule colours.

Now it seems that chocolate snobbery is catching up, as bars of small batch, single origin, craft chocolate with high percentages of rare cacao beans come with complex tasting notes that wouldnâ€™t look out of place on a wine label, boasting â€˜summer fruitâ€™ or floral notes, mocha or caramel, spice or even tannins â€“ and exclusive price tags to match, at â‚¬5 or upwards for a bar of about 60g-75g.

But is it all just a load of jargon designed to part fools with their money, or can a simple bar of chocolate merit those higher prices?

When commercially produced it can afford to be cheaper for several practical reasons, including the economies of scale of factory production and the cost of the ingredients themselves. Most ordinary

commercial milk chocolate contains 30pc or less of cocoa solids, the other 70-plus percent being sugar, powdered milk, vanilla and emulsifiers. Buy chocolate with a higher cocoa percentage and the price will reflect that ratio.

Then thereâ€™s the cacao bean itself, of which three types are cultivated today. To borrow an analogy from the wine-buff movie Sideways, if Forastero beans are the Merlot grape of cacao, being adaptable and high-yielding, then Criollo is the Pinot Noir: high maintenance but with often exquisite results. Criollo is also extremely rare, accounting for less than 1pc of all cacao bean production today. Trinitario beans, a cross between thoroughbred Criollo and workhorse Forastero, account for 4pc, and Forastero the remainder.

Regional Chocolate Snob Variations

The origin of the bean also influences flavour, quality and price. â€˜Single originâ€™ means that the beans are from one country or region (or even one â€˜single estateâ€™). Wine drinkers expect a difference between a Pinot Noir produced in Burgundy, Chile or New Zealand. The â€˜terroirâ€™ of the grapes â€“ where they are grown and under what conditions â€“ affects the wineâ€™s flavour profile, as does the handling of the grapes. Terroir explains why we might seek out Wexford strawberries, Comber Early potatoes, Ethiopian Yirgacheffe arabica coffee or Madagascan Criollo cacao beans. Youâ€™re also paying for the expertise, skill and labour of the producer. Until recently, Irish chocolate was either factory-produced or from craft chocolatiers.

A chocolatier buys in quality beans that they temper (stabilising the crystals and ensuring a good sheen and snap) and mould into bars or mix with cream to make truffles, typically in small batches to keep a close eye on results. Some, like Wexford-based sisters Natalie and Karen Keane of Bean & Goose, work exclusively with single-origin chocolate as they believe the different flavour profiles allow them greater scope for flavour pairings.

Others â€“ bean-to-bar â€˜chocolate makersâ€™ â€“ buy in the fermented cacao bean itself and then roast and winnow (separating cacao nib and husk), refine and conch (grinding to release and distribute the cocoa butter within), blend (typically with sweeteners of one sort or another) and finally temper.

Itâ€™s a lot more trouble to go to but bean-to-bar producers like those at Hazel Mountain Chocolate, Wilkies Chocolate and Clonakilty Chocolate believe itâ€™s worth it. Yes, itâ€™s more labour intensive, they say, but it allows greater control over not just where and who they buy from their beans from but how those beans are handled and what they are blended with.

For Alisson Roberts of Clonakilty Chocolate, paying the grower a fair price is a primary concern. She imports Fairtrade cacao beans from Kumasi in Ghana. â€œWest Africa in particular is really corrupt,â€• she says, â€œso I like trying to have an impact there and trying to help right some of the wrongs.â€• She suggests that if we are gifting a luxury product like chocolate to loved ones, that shouldnâ€™t be at the cost of poor pay or working conditions, or in some cases, child labour.

John and Kasia Connolly of Hazel Mountain Chocolate buy their cacao beans directly from small farmers or co-ops, with Venezuelan, Madagascan, Costa Rican and Cuban beans shipped directly to their boutique Burren-based chocolate factory, where visitors can sample the produce at its various stages. This Direct Trade route ensures that a greater percentage of what the consumer pays goes to

the cacao farmer.

Hazel Mountain Chocolate roasts its beans lightly to accentuate the nuances of flavours across the various beans (with parallels in the trend towards lighter roasts for coffee). The caramel and butterscotch notes of its Cuban beans work well as a milk flavoured bar while Venezuelan Criollo beans, with their high cocoa butter content, give a â€œsmooth and buttery product with dark fruits, plum and smoky notesâ€•.

â€œBut,â€• adds John, â€œall that goes out of the window if the product has vanilla in it,â€• pointing to another advantage of bean-to-bar production: ultimate control over exactly what goes into the final product. Hazel Mountain Chocolate chooses not to add vanilla, as it homogenises the flavour.

Shana Wilkie of Wilkies Chocolate prides herself on being one of the few modern makers not to add emulsifiers. She says that this makes the chocolate harder to handle but results in a purer product. Clonakilty Chocolate, meanwhile, is a sugar-free brand. â€œI like opting for an alternative to a mass-produced, mono-culture product,â€• says Roberts, who prefers to use coconut sugar.

Validating Chocolate

But assuming that your chocolate-maker or chocolatier is selling you what they tell you they are, what about those high-falutinâ€™ tasting notes? I gathered a motley crew of ardent fans, including dark flavour purists and milk chocolate lovers, to blind taste-test a selection of single-origin chocolate. The results were interesting.

As with any wine tasting, especially with untrained tasters, the descriptors varied but there were some parallels with the official tasting notes. We all identified caramel notes in the Java 32pc chocolate, for example, while the Equadorian 76pc brought to mind descriptors like lavender, perfumed, cereal, grassy â€“ not too far from the official â€˜floralâ€™ note.

But the biggest learning was that, as with wine, everyoneâ€™s taste is different.

One personâ€™s â€˜brilliantâ€™ is anotherâ€™s â€˜worthyâ€™ (and not in a good way). The most important thing is to figure out what you like and find someone who produces it well â€“ and, if possible, ethically.

And it that means spending a little extra, at least you know what youâ€™re paying for.

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