

INSIGHT

THE ART OF LIVING

The LUXURY ISSUE

RAISING THE BAR

Gourmet brands are crafting artisanal luxury chocolates that elevate the taste experience. By Dali Castro

Nine out of ten people like chocolate. The tenth person always lies. The quip from American cartoonist John Q. Tullius may be a tongue-in-cheek stat, but when it comes to the popularity of chocolate, the real numbers don't lie. Revenues for the international chocolate market will climb to US\$161.56 billion by 2024, according to Zion Market Research, a company based in New York City that tracks global market trends.

And something else is on the rise — consumer demand for boutique-quality premium products. Responding to these more-discerning palates, gourmet chocolatiers around the world are offering innovative taste experiences and visual appeal, whether it's edible 24-karat gold leaves, chocolate-encased Périgord truffles or handcrafted boxes studded with Swarovski crystals.

In Toronto, CXBO raised the bar in 2016 when it introduced its brand of small-batch chocolates. Co-owned by restaurateur-chocolatier Brandon Olsen and artist Sarah Keenlyside, CXBO (short for Chocolates X Brandon Olsen) made news as purveyors of edible art that channels Jackson Pollock's abstract expressionist paintings into colour-splattered, silky-textured confections. The notion of chocolate being “just brown” has changed, says Keenlyside, who credits *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* as inspiration for the cheerful palette of CXBO chocolates. >



LEFT: CXBO's chocolates in Toronto are palette- and palate-pleasing. OPPOSITE PAGE: (From top) To'ak Chocolate in Ecuador was conceived along the lines of a vintage winemaker. Breaking open *objet d'art* Ziggy Stardust Disco Egg will reveal its contents of aerated-chocolate chunks. Photos: CXBO; To'ak

“As a kid, I was blown away by the [film’s] colourful people, the unbridled creativity.” As for the product’s innovative mould — a modernist geodesic dome — it was a CBC TV documentary on modern architecture that got her creative juices flowing.

As boutique chocolatiers continue to think outside the box, Keenlyside foresees interesting new trends — nuanced natural flavours and innovative combinations of essential oils and nuts, such as pistachio-bergamot. She also predicts that chocolate will be perceived as “not just food, but an experience.”

To'ak Chocolate in coastal Ecuador delivers quite the experience, and then some. Born from a rainforest conservation project initiated by To'ak co-founder Jerry Toth, this tree-to-bar dark-chocolate maker releases limited-edition batches of 100 50-gram bars four times a year. Prices per bar vary, from \$376 for the Rain Harvest 2017 to \$919 for the Art Series Guayasamín. Purportedly the most expensive in the world, To'ak chocolate bars are crafted, ideally, for judicious pairings, say, with a single malt and a Pyrenees sheep's-milk cheese.

Alongside its strict commitment to sustainability and ethical work practices, To'ak — the name, a fusion of two ancient indigenous Ecuadorian dialects, means “earth” and “tree” — has taken luxury chocolate to a whole new realm. Pods are harvested from heirloom Nacional Arriba cacao trees, and the chocolate is processed entirely by hand, then aged in wood casks, all on-site.

“It’s about the way we value chocolate and present it to the world — as something extremely special,” explains Chicago-born Toth, describing the six-year-old company’s pioneering approach. “For thousands of years, cacao was regarded as sacred by pretty much every culture it touched until the era of mass food production in the 20th century. I don’t think any other chocolate brand fixates on cacao genetics the way we do.” The company even uses aromatic *palo santo* (“holy stick”) wood for the aging process.

New at To'ak this year is T.cacao, geared towards people who want to integrate



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the health benefits of cacao powder into their daily routine. “You can add it to your smoothie or morning coffee,” Toth says. “Or use it to make a ‘bulletproof’-style drink or to make drinking chocolate.”

The company is also planning to launch a line of chocolate bars that would be, according to Toth, “more accessible” in price.

Toth is very hands-on at To'ak. “I’m a cacao farmer myself. I raise cacao trees from seed and seedling,” says Toth, who was a Wall Street banker for “a few months” after graduating from Cornell University in 2000 with a BA in economics. “We ferment our own cacao. These are things we have the privilege of doing because we’re located ‘at origin’ in Ecuador. I don’t know if there are any other luxury chocolate companies that can say the same thing.”

The luxury factor at To'ak also extends to its packaging. Nestled in an elm-wood box engraved with its own edition number is an elegantly simple dark chocolate square with a roasted cacao bean in the centre; a bamboo tasting utensil to use for distancing the chocolate from one’s fingers, so the nose picks up only the chocolate’s aroma; and a 116-page booklet detailing, among other things, the history of chocolate and To'ak.

What’s key in tasting fine chocolate is exploring the aroma first, just like with wine. And so, with gourmet purveyors intent on transforming the cacao bean into exquisite taste experiences, chocolate could well become the collector’s next obsession of choice — one that would be duly savoured and truly appreciated. □

CORAZÓN DE CACAO

Brown + Hudson, a bespoke travel group in London founded by Philippe Brown, has partnered with To'ak to offer an exclusive trip to Ecuador — “The Untold Story of Cacao” — centered on a visit to To'ak’s plantation in Piedra de Plata. There are two options — 4 days/3 nights or the custom-tailored 8 days/7 nights. brownandhudson.com

