RAISING THE BAR

India's bean-to-bar artisans are revolutionising chocolate in the country – and one brand is taking the craft even further

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Previous: A cocoa pod contains 30 to 40 beans and around 400 dried beans are required to make 450g of chocolate

Right: Soklet was co-founded by Karthikeyan Palaniswamy and Harish Manoj Kumar; women carrying fresh cocoa pods

IN INDIA, THE brand name Cadbury has long been a synonym for chocolate – but all that is changing as a new wave of artisan "bean-to-bar" chocolate producers are doing things differently across the country. This rather sweet movement is being taken even further at a 100-hectare farm near Pollachi, at the foot of the Anamalai Hills in Tamil Nadu state. Here, under the shade of three-storey-high coconut palms, cocoa trees grow in neat, even rows. Hanging from the low branches and along the thick trunks are cocoa pods the size and shape of American footballs, each one marked with long grooves. It is here that brothers-in-law Karthikeyan Palaniswamy and Harish Manoj Kumar produce Soklet, India's first tree-to-bar chocolate brand.

Launched in 2017, Soklet is one of the newest players in India's craft chocolate scene, which has taken off in recent years. It was just five years ago that the country's artisan chocolate movement began, with pioneering bean-to-bar producers Naviluna (formerly Earth Loaf) and Mason & Co, both based in South India where cocoa is cultivated. Today, there are seven artisan producers making high-quality bars from Indian cocoa and this small tribe is quickly growing.

Traditional chocolatiers around the world tend to melt down bars of processed couverture – chocolate made with mass-produced cocoa from Africa or South America – but India's artisan chocolate makers have the luxury of using home-grown cocoa

beans. The production of "bean-to-bar" chocolate is a complex and laborious process but means that artisans can keep the focus on flavour and nuance. While bean-to-bar makers start the chocolate-making process once the already-fermented and dried cocoa beans arrive in their factories, Soklet takes this one step further, and starts with the cocoa tree itself. "We grow the cocoa ourselves and are involved in every step of the process, from the breeding of the cocoa trees to the tempering of the final bar," says Palaniswamy. "We touch and feel the products at every step."

Despite this dedicated approach, the family business came about by chance. "My background is in textile manufacturing and my brother-in-law, Harish, used to work in computer engineering and textile trading," says Palaniswamy. "Harish is now a full-time farmer and has been cultivating cocoa for the past 13 years. He was looking to add value to the crop and I have always been interested in food. We joked that we should try making our own chocolate and then one thing led to another."

The farm's main crop was originally coconuts and cocoa trees were initially planted for intercropping purposes. Thanks to good humidity levels and two rainy seasons, the local climate is ideal for cocoa and the new crop was a success. "I practise regenerative farming methods," Harish Kumar says of his approach to agriculture. "We use fallen leaves and cocoa-pod waste to fertilise and replace the lost top soil, so there's no waste. We also have two →

Left: A woman at the Soklet farm separates cocoa beans from their shells using a process known as "winnowing"

Right: Packaging is designed by Rock Paper Scissors in Coimbatore, who took inspiration from Kanjeevaram sarees

"AS A FARMER, I CAN PLAY A **VITAL ROLE** IN IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF MY **COCOA CROP** – AND **CHOCOLATE**"

dozen cows here that eat cocoa-pod husks and create compost which fertilises the land, and fish that produce organic fertiliser. As a farmer, I can play a vital role in improving the quality of my cocoa crop. If I give the right input, I will have the right output – it is a holistic approach." The rest is up to terroir, a term familiar to coffee growers but relevant here too. It is not only the soil, climate and environment that gives cocoa its flavour but also other trees and plants growing on the farm. Because of this, nuances in taste change with each harvest and season.

Of course, post-harvest processing also plays a huge role in flavour development. Another big advantage of the tree-to-bar method is that the farmer controls the two most critical steps of the chocolate-making process: fermentation and drying. "These two vital steps greatly influence the final flavour of the chocolate," says Kumar. "Immediately after harvest, the cocoa beans and sweet white pulp are removed from the pods and fermented together in wooden boxes for up to a week, before being dried slowly and evenly first in the shade and then under the hot sun for up to eight days."

I had my first taste of Soklet – which is the colloquial word for chocolate in the local Tamil language – at a gourmet supermarket in Chennai, the state capital. It was a task to choose from the brand's 10 different varieties, which range from enticing concoctions like Bhut Jolokia (a potent chilli pepper) and Himalayan Pink Salt, to Filter Kaapi, which is infused with South Indian coffee, and Candied Ginger. But, like coffee, the only way to experience the subtle nuances of the flavour of chocolate is to take it black. Bite into a piece of Soklet's 70% Dark Chocolate and you will find a mildly bitter flavour with delightfully earthy notes.

It is a taste that is earning Soklet fans across India and around the world, and won the brothers-in-law an International Cocoa Award in Paris shortly after launching the brand in 2017. Fellow Indian bean-to-bar brands are also garnering international recognition, with Naviluna and Chitra'm recently winning at the 2018 Asia-Pacific International Chocolate Awards in Taiwan. In a country where Cadbury has long been synonymous with chocolate, it is proof that these artisan producers certainly are raising the bar. ❂
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