

A modern chocolate tale

Emma Wheaton meets Margaret River-based chocolate maker Josh Bahen, who has revived the traditional way of making chocolate using just two ingredients and sourcing cocoa beans from farmers across the globe.

Far from the wacky and fantastical vision of a chocolate factory conjured up by the likes of Willy Wonka, Bahen & Co. produces real chocolate made the traditional way on a rural property in south-west Australia.

These days, most of the chocolate we're familiar with is actually confectionary, with 'tons' of sugar, milk, emulsifiers and fat added to it, explains Bahen & Co.'s Josh Bahen. Josh and his wife, Jacqui, make chocolate the old-fashioned way using just two ingredients – cocoa beans and organic cane sugar – at their factory on the Bahen family property in Margaret River.

Originally a winemaker, Josh was working in France's Burgundy region, making pinot, in 2004 when he first came across high-end artisan chocolate. His introduction to this quality product and how it's created left a lasting impression on Josh, who decided about five years ago to stop focusing on wine and transfer his time and energy to creating an authentic chocolate product for Australians.

"The chocolate makers in France have a very different approach. Basically, their focus is on the quality of the bean, so they're making chocolate, not a confectionary product," Josh explains. "Over the past few decades the product has been dulled down with fat and sugar."

Bahen & Co.'s traditional manufacturing process means nothing needs to be added to the two pure ingredients, so the product is free from added fat, emulsifiers and preservatives. Finding the manufacturing equipment wasn't so easy, with Josh literally scouring the globe (the equipment is from Germany, Italy, Spain and Central America) for machinery, one piece of which is from El Salvador and is 100 years old. 🍫



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Opposite page and clockwise from top: Jacqui keeps an eye on the product; Jacqui and Josh Bahen at work on their artisan chocolate; Bahen & Co. source their beans directly from the cacao growers; the chocolate is made using traditional equipment; the Bahen & Co. packaging is inspired by Josh and Jacqui's travels.



Clockwise from top left: Cocoa beans; the Margaret River property; Bahen & Co. equipment; visiting the cacao growers; the end product.

Next page: the cacao tree's precious fruit; beautiful Bahen & Co. packaging.



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“A hundred years ago chocolate was a lot better than what it is today; it focused on quality rather than quantity and processing speed. Our whole focus is quality and taste – we don’t care how long it takes,” says Josh, adding that they age the stone-ground cocoa and cane sugar for two to three months. “We prefer to let the smell of the chocolate out; it makes it a lot smoother and the flavours more complex.”

Bahen & Co.’s simplified approach to chocolate making might seem revolutionary but it harks back to ancient times. Chocolate was an important part of Mayan and Aztec cultures, particularly for royal and religious events. Archaeological sites in Mexico have revealed ceramic vessels with residue on them that suggests they were used for preparing cocoa beverages as far back as 1900BC. With industrialisation in the 18th century came a new process that saw cocoa butter added to chocolate, and the subsequent development of the emulsification process heralded the creation of what we know today as chocolate.

What Josh is interested in is going back to the source, the cacao tree, and making a product of the best quality possible.

To keep up with global demand for chocolate, modern hybrids of the cacao tree have been grown and bred for their yield. However, just as tomatoes sourced straight from the farmer will arguably taste better than those from the supermarket, the heirloom strands of cacao – rather than the modern hybrids used by most chocolate makers – taste very different, Josh explains.

When 70 per cent of the flavour of your product comes down to the quality of the cocoa bean, it’s no wonder this chocolate-loving entrepreneur spent five years travelling across the globe researching and meeting cocoa farmers as well as sourcing traditional equipment for his business.

It’s not only the type of tree but also the region in which it is grown that affects the flavour of the end product. Travelling to, and working with, farmers in Brazil, Madagascar, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, Josh says the key to his business success is the direct link with the farmers in these regions, but it hasn’t been a fast or easy process.

“I started out trying to meet as many farmers as I could and I quickly learned that finding high-quality cocoa is literally impossible. Less than one per cent of the world’s cocoa is suitable for Bahen & Co.’s style of chocolate,” says Josh.

“I want to be able to show people how different chocolate can be from region to region. For example, the Brazilian product is really chocolaty and dark, whereas the Madagascan is quite citrusy and is like biting into a piece of fruit,” Josh adds, his passion spilling over.

Working with AusAID and other NGOs, Josh says they visit farmers and their plantations, donating time and basic equipment in their quest to create not only a better situation for the farmers but also a better quality cocoa product. Better quality beans means better prices for the farmers’ produce.

“The farmers are fantastic,” says Josh. “The reason some of them are paid so low is because the quality of the beans is low – they haven’t been shown how to grow the trees and ferment the beans properly. So, using my experience as a winemaker I’m able to go in there and show them how to ferment the beans properly.” ☺

Josh says that something as simple as a \$1 thermometer – which the cacao growers can't afford, let alone know where to purchase – can improve the quality of their crop in just a week. Working directly with these farmers, Josh is able to educate them to produce the best quality bean so he can pay them more and ensure a premium end result for Bahen & Co., too.

"Recently, we were in Vanuatu with a few NGOs," Josh recalls. "They chartered a couple of planes, so we island-hopped out to all the different farmers and did tastings using their own beans, which I'd made into dark chocolate.

"We sat down and tasted them and that was a pretty amazing experience. Some of these people had not even eaten chocolate before ... and they're growing the beans!"

Josh stresses the importance for the company of establishing a direct trade link and relationship with the farmers. It means he is able to go back and forth, making chocolate from their bean samples until they make the right improvements and he can eventually purchase cocoa-bean-filled hessian sacks by the container-load straight from them.

"We have a new Papua New Guinea farm and we've got our first container from there sitting in Fremantle, Perth, at the moment. It's been a long project but it's also been fantastic," he says.

Over in the Solomon Islands, Josh has sought to preserve the heirloom genetic of the cacao tree after bitter hybrids were planted there in the '70s. The project, which is part of AusAID's Cocoa Livelihoods Improvement Program, involves sourcing the high-flavour heirloom plants and planting them in new farms.

Back home in Margaret River, where they're busy making chocolate seven days a week, Josh says one of the biggest challenges is the old equipment. "There are no spare parts and certainly no user manual!" he says. At the same time, he wouldn't have it any other way. Wrapped in beautiful paper and gold foil, the end result of years of hard work is a dark, rich chocolate that isn't bitter but is full of flavour that varies from origin to origin. Josh and Jacqui's innovative and passionate approach to chocolate making has proved to be a point of difference that's being welcomed with open arms. **10**

For more information about Bahen & Co.'s unique approach to chocolate making (or to purchase the company's chocolate) visit www.bahenchocolate.com.



FAST FACT

Each Bahen & Co. package is individually hand-wrapped in thick, patterned paper inspired by Josh and Jacqui Bahen's travels and "all the cocoa lands and their great history".