

# FROM BEAN TO BAR

*MiNDFOOD travels with chef Al Brown to Margaret River to visit winemaker-turned-artisan chocolate producer Josh Bahen of Bahen & Co.*

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**T**ucked away at the end of a country lane surrounded by 300 acres of vines in Margaret River, Western Australia, sits a modest-sized barn from which an intoxicating smell of chocolate and roasted cacao fills the air.

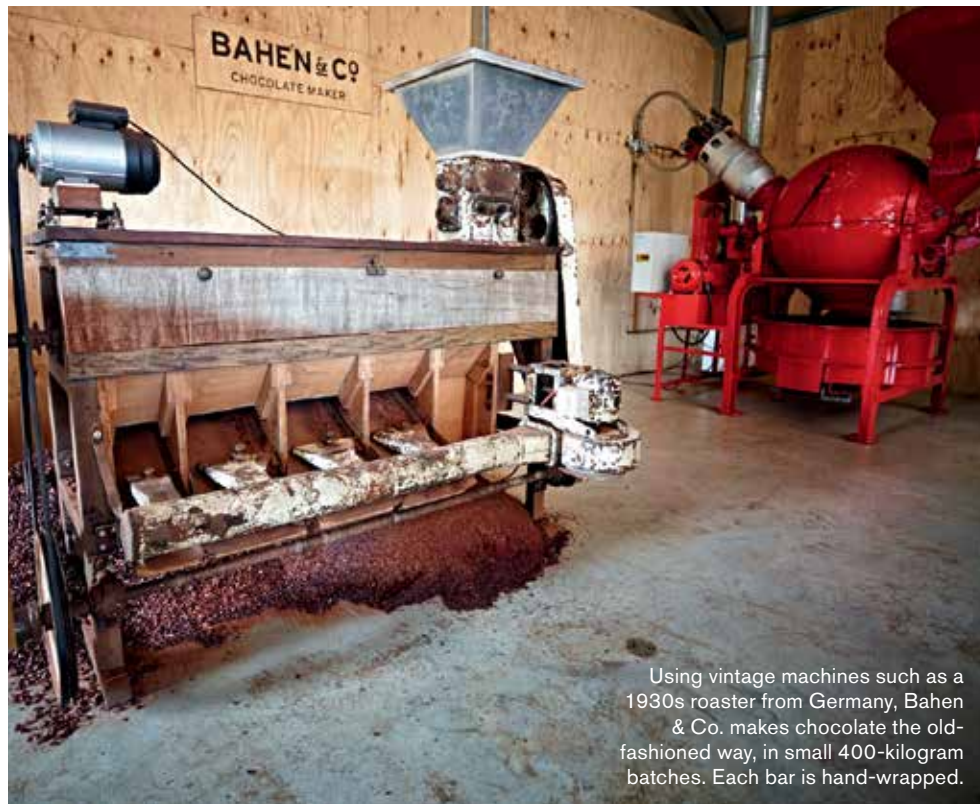
We've travelled here with chef Al Brown, who is now busy inhaling the aroma of freshly cut cocoa beans sliced by a cocoa guillotine. "Oh my God, get your nose in there," exclaims Brown, his face a mixture of delight and astonishment.

"If you chop them in half and they smell like that you know there's something good going on," says Josh Bahen, chocolatier and founder of Bahen & Co. Bahen has gone to great lengths to source the best cocoa beans for his chocolate. Over the past six years he has worked with 400 farmers and sources beans from just three he thinks are good enough to use.

Cacao, or cocoa, is the term given to the fermented and dried seeds (often called beans) of the cacao plants, which are at the heart of chocolate production.

Bahen was a winemaker before he began his chocolate journey 10 years ago – until that point he didn't even like the stuff. That all changed when he bit into a piece of dark chocolate in France.

"It was like biting into a piece of fruit," Bahen explains. This inspired him to sell his house, buy 25 tonnes of chocolate-making gear and "have a real crack at it". ▶



Using vintage machines such as a 1930s roaster from Germany, Bahen & Co. makes chocolate the old-fashioned way, in small 400-kilogram batches. Each bar is hand-wrapped.







"This chocolate definitely doesn't appeal to everyone and we're quite happy with that," says Josh Bahen of his artisan product.

Since producing its first bar of chocolate two years ago, Bahen & Co. has grown and can now be found at the Margaret River Farmers' Market; the artisan product is also exported to the United States and the UK.

For Bahen and wife Jacq it's a case of "addition by subtraction" – doing less to make better chocolate and allowing the cocoa bean to express its wild signature.

"We wanted to make chocolate the way it was originally made with cocoa beans and cane sugar, nothing else," Bahen says. "It did paint us in a corner a little bit but it really made us work hard on trying to get the best beans we possibly could and work really hard on that post-harvest."

**PURE AND SIMPLE**

Because Bahen & Co. chocolate only uses two ingredients, the cocoa beans need to be of the highest quality. Bahen and his father Mark travel with a cocoa guillotine. "Once you've got this you can determine a lot about how the farmer does his stuff," Bahen says.

Early on, Bahen realised the similarities between winemaking and chocolate making. "Once I learned that with chocolate the fermentation and the right harvesting time of the pods was 80 per cent of the equation I thought, 'I wonder if we can make a product that is really different,'" he says. "We're surprised at how many people like the product – we thought it might be only 30 per cent of the market but even people who eat milk chocolate can eat this. It is not bitter at all and that is down to good bean fermentation."



Underripe or immature beans have no flavour when roasted and are bitter to taste, which is why vanilla is often added to "commodity" chocolate, says Bahen. For him adding vanilla, milk or fat would be "a sin". Cacao is the most expensive component of chocolate and Bahen & Co.'s house blend contains 80 per cent.

"The challenge with cacao is it can be fully ripe but the pod is green and that won't change colour," he says. "Once the pod is cut you are committed and the problem is farmers are paid such a low price that if they cut an underripe pod they throw it in the mix anyway so the ripe and immature pods are going into the same fermentation bin. The whole problem with the industry is that it is price-driven and the farmers are so disconnected from the end user now that there is no education at all."

The Bahens are hoping to change that. They have been working with farmers in Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, going into villages and doing side-by-side tastings with different quality beans. "Once they taste it, the penny really drops," says Bahen.

They then work on teaching the farmers how to ferment properly. "We give them a \$20 thermometer and it can change their lives. They can get double the value [for their cocoa] if all they do is get a good ferment by measuring the temperature."

Another issue is that for the past 100 years most of the world's cacao trees have been replanted with hybrids that are high cropping and disease resistant but have little flavour. The Bahens needed to trace the heirloom strains that were selected by the Mayans and Aztecs.

"A lot of good stuff in Central America, where it came from, has died due to disease or it has been replanted," Bahen says.

The company sources heirloom stock from Madagascar, Brazil and Papua New Guinea, a process Bahen's father Mark says is a "time-consuming treasure hunt".

As we follow Bahen around, tasting beans and helping to roast a batch, we're all won over – Brown sums up the experience for us with one word, "magic".

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