

the chocolate factory

A MARGARET RIVER WINERY IS AN UNUSUAL SPOT FOR CHOCOLATE MAKING, BUT IT'S WHERE THIS COUPLE LAUNCHED THE DELICIOUS BAHEN & CO RANGE.

WORDS BARBARA SWEENEY PHOTOGRAPHY PRUE RUSCOE



Josh and Jacq Bahen with sacks of raw cocoa beans from around the globe. **FACING PAGE** Made from just two ingredients — cocoa and organic cane sugar — Bahen & Co's Madagascar chocolate has lively citrus, rum and raisin flavours.

WHEREVER THERE'S A DREAM to follow, hard work is usually not far behind. That's the case for Josh Bahen and his wife Jacq, who make chocolate at his family's Bantry Bay Vineyard, near Margaret River, south of Perth.

A winemaker with a decade of vintages under his belt, Josh had an epiphany when he took his first bite of chocolate made by Bonnat, a venerable French company. It was 2004 and Josh was working as a winemaker in Burgundy, and until that fateful mouthful he had no idea chocolate could taste like that. "It was like biting into a piece of fruit," he recalls. "It had distinct flavours I had never experienced before in a chocolate. I was both intrigued and surprised that these flavours were possible in a chocolate bar."

Bonnat — along with a few other European chocolate makers such as Michel Cluizel and Valrhona — buys the best cocoa beans in the world. For them, the bean is king and, like wine, its individual character is allowed full expression, whether it's fruity, chocolatey, spicy or earthy.

When he worked as a winemaker, Josh understood the relationship between good grapes and the resulting wine. "I knew winemakers did little more than crush the grapes," he says. "The crucial work is done in the lead-up to the harvest." He returned to Australia and dreamed of making chocolate as good — or even better — than Bonnat.

Ten years later, Josh and Jacq operate a chocolate business called Bahen & Co. From the outside, their purpose-built factory looks like a huge tin shed set among vineyards and paddocks of grazing cattle, a short drive from their home at the surfing village of Prevelly. Despite intermittent phone reception and internet access, the factory is the heart of their enterprise. Areas designated to particular tasks and processes have been carved out of the space: an orderly office; warehouse shelves stacked with hessian sacks plump with raw cocoa beans from around the globe; and the all-important manufacturing equipment.

This artisanal end of the chocolate-making spectrum uses vintage equipment designed for small batches. Each piece of machinery, tracked down from far-flung places around the world, has a story. In the corner is a large, red cocoa bean roaster that emits a low grumble when switched on and, next to it, a rickety timber contraption called a winnower that removes the bean casings to reveal the cocoa nibs.

In the next room is the *mélangeur*, a century-old monster with two granite wheels that grind the cocoa nibs and organic cane sugar — the only other ingredient in Bahen chocolate — to a paste. Then there's the 1950s Italian conche, which turns the paste into chocolate. "It's slow, but good for producing high-flavour chocolate," Josh says. >



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT
Chocolate is tempered for a smooth texture and glossy appearance; Jacq designed the Bahen & Co wrapping so the chocolate bars make appealing gifts; one of the farmhouses on the family property; Jacq pours roasted beans into the winnower, found in an abandoned chocolate factory in Latin America; cocoa bean husks expelled from the winnower; a bag of raw beans goes into the 1930s German roaster. FACING PAGE Josh with Jedha, the couple's Staffordshire-cross.

The Bahens are seeking a wrapper to complete their machinery inventory, but until it arrives from Italy, chocolate bars will continue to be wrapped in foil and beautiful paper by hand.

Some of the equipment is more than 100 years old and none of it came with a 'How To' manual. Breakdowns are inevitable, and Josh and Jacq have several nail-biting stories of crucial failures and tracking down craftsmen to repair or refashion a working part for a virtual antique.

Sourcing good quality beans has been just as challenging. The Bahens quickly realised that to get the quality and type of bean needed for good chocolate, they would have to deal directly with farmers. From the thousand or so samples of cocoa beans Josh has tested over the past seven years, only four producers — from Madagascar, Brazil and Papua New Guinea — have gone on to become regular suppliers.

Plant genetics aside, a good quality bean is the result of proper handling post harvest. Like many of the bean-to-bar enthusiasts — the movement is big on the west coast of the US — Josh works with growers to improve fermentation and drying to ensure he gets a near perfect bean. "You can't mask the flavour of defective beans," he says.

Even though Bahen & Co started out as his dream, Josh acknowledges that it would not have been achieved without Jacq. The couple met in Perth in 2005 and Jacq moved to Margaret River in 2006. "That's when we decided to make a decent go at this business," she says.

"It might be the winemaker's vision," Josh says. "But Jacq can do everything: she has an amazing palate, she designed our look... We complement each other and it works." *

For more information, visit www.bahenchocolate.com

Taking a break from what Josh describes as the "slow paced and meticulous manufacture of a style of chocolate that reconnects the consumer with the source".

