



# a sweet voice

USING ANCIENT MACHINERY THAT STILL WORKS LIKE A SONG, FORMER WINE MAKERS JOSH AND JACQUI BAHEN HAVE STARTED CREATING CHOCOLATE WITH JUST TWO INGREDIENTS.

*Writer Mark Welker Photographer Thom Perry*



“PRE-INDUSTRIAL,” IS HOW JOSH BAHEN DESCRIBES HIS TASTE FOR CHOCOLATE. HIS BAHEN & CO. CHOCOLATE FACTORY IN MARGARET RIVER, WESTERN AUSTRALIA, STARTED PRODUCTION JUST A YEAR AGO, BUT IT’S FILLED WITH DELIBERATE NOSTALGIA FOR THE PAST.

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A weathered 1962 Land Rover Type 2 idles in the garage, its tray heavy with the spoils of Bahen and his father Mark’s global hunt for old-world cacao. The overstuffed hessian sacks are unloaded and stacked into pyramids, each bearing the name of its origin: Madagascar, New Guinea, Solomon. Beans are scattered through the workshop; spread thinly on a bench for sorting and distributed into steel pails, their expelled shell casings crunching underfoot. The sweet, mocha smell of roasting cacao fills the air. And everywhere there is chocolate, in all stages of creation.

Bahen’s wife and co-chocolatier, Jacqui, watches on with practised discipline as the huge stone wheels of a circa 1910 Guitard Melangeur grinder gently polish cocoa nibs into a rich chocolate paste. And there, stacked like the beginnings of some glorious edible cabin, are the finished blocks of hand-made chocolate that Bahen & Co. are quickly becoming known for.

A winemaker with a background in agricultural science, 34-year-old Bahen is leading the charge to shift the Australian palate for chocolate using just two ingredients.

Consumption of the cacao bean can be traced as far back as 1400 BC to Mesoamerica, where its residue has been found on pottery excavated in Honduras. During the 16th and 17th centuries, cocoa (processed cacao) was slowly introduced to Europe via Spanish conquistadors, but it wasn’t until halfway through the 19th century that cocoa powder was blended with cocoa butter to create the saleable product called chocolate.

The supermarket chocolate we eat today contains as little as 20 per cent of its source: cacao. Over the course of the last century additives like milk, sugar and emulsifiers have been steadily increased to help round out the bitterness we relate to high-cocoa chocolate, creating a broader, more generic flavour.

“The commoditisation of chocolate has, over time, ruined its nuances and flavours,” Bahen says. As he explains it, the first chocolate makers had access to cacao genetics far less bitter than the stuff in mass production today. “Like most modern agricultural crops, the breeding programs of cacao are largely concerned with disease resistance and yield, not with flavour.”

For this reason Bahen never really liked chocolate. It wasn’t until a fellow winemaker posted him a single origin, stone-ground bar that his opinion began to change. “When I

tasted that bar it was a turning point in my life,” he says. “It was like biting into a piece of fruit. I didn’t know chocolate could have those flavours and I didn’t understand why I had never tasted it before.”

For more than 1000 years wine production has been focused on one goal: flavour. Drawing on his background, Bahen researched the source of the taste that had surprised him. “When I saw the link between flavour and production – that 70 per cent of the flavour comes from bean fermentation, a process almost identical to wine grape fermentation – I knew there was a link in the chain that I could put back in.”

Around 2007 Bahen started researching chocolate. He planned to spend around a year exploring his options before hitting the production line. The reality was somewhat different. Not long into the process he realised that doing things the old fashioned way was going to take time. He spent the next four years travelling and meeting with anyone who would speak to him.

Bahen & Co. use only two ingredients in their chocolate: heirloom cacao beans and organic cane sugar. “It’s a lot harder to do less,” Bahen says. “If you’ve only got two ingredients you paint yourself into a corner; unless the beans are 100 per cent you can’t use them. I’d say at present there are less than 10 producers in the world who turn out cacao to a standard that’s suitable for making our style of chocolate.”

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The first challenge was locating the right heirloom genetics. These varieties exist in scarcity today, clustered in ‘seed banks’ across the equatorial rim where heirloom varieties planted by colonialists have survived intact due to geographic isolation. “Heirloom cacao beans produce much finer aromatics, more fruitiness with less bitterness,” Bahen explains. “The complexity of flavour is far superior than modern hybridised cacao.”

After working and travelling through Central America, Bahen turned his sights closer to home, determined to uncover similar genetics in Vanuatu, Madagascar and the Solomon Islands.

Working with AusAID and various NGOs, he and his father have travelled through some of the most unforgiving terrain in the world to identify genetic species of cacao in the field, and try to develop direct relationships with farmers. “By going direct, we know the genetics, we know the farm, and we know the farmer. All of a sudden you build a supply chain that’s very transparent and honest, and it leads to the production of chocolate that speaks to its origin.”

Deforestation to accommodate monoculture crops like palm oil and sugar cane pose the biggest threats to a sustainable cacao industry. While clearfelling provides a farmer with an instant source of income, the process leaves little long-term prospects for making a sustainable living off the land.

“A strong cacao industry focused on flavour brings the highest long-term return,” Bahen says. “Cacao farming requires high amounts of labour and, because cacao is a shade crop, the maintenance of a two-tier forest ecosystem. It’s about as friendly as crops come.”

Many farmers Bahen meets have never tasted chocolate made from their own beans, and most have no idea where their beans end up. “We process small batches of chocolate from each farmer’s crop and present it back to them,” he explains. “Through this benchmarking process we educate the farmers’ palates and teach them how to get into the flavour market to gain higher returns. By breaking down the chain and going direct, we can give the farmer a much larger financial reward.”

The program has resulted in new heirloom seedling nurseries established in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, and in the next two years they hope to see the first fine flavour cacao come through from the work they’ve been doing in the South Pacific.

Once beans are picked, fermented and transported to Margaret River, every step in the production process is designed to preserve the natural flavours produced in the plantation. The small-batch production provides the opportunity for Bahen & Co. to invest in vintage machines that run at a slower pace than those tailored to the pressures of a mass-production line. Stone replaces steel in the grinder and conche, which helps to tease out flavour gently. A 1930s Barth Sirocco Ball Roaster allows roasting at lower temperatures to retain the individual nuances of each bean.

“The older equipment uses stone and isn’t generally geared to add emulsifiers or fat to the chocolate,” Bahen explains. “Emulsifiers didn’t even exist when these machines were in operation. We found one machine in Spain, one in El Salvador and our roaster in Australia. It was sitting there disused in a corner of an old factory.”

The winnower was the Bahen’s El Salvador find, and is used to separate the cocoa nib from its husk. The 100-year-old mess of belts, iron

levers and leaden cogs was rescued from a old chocolate factory and it took a year to get the machine back to Australia. When it arrived at the docks in Fremantle it was dropped, smashing into 100 pieces.

“It didn’t have an instruction manual,” Bahen laments. “And I’m not an engineer.” It took another three months to slowly piece it back together.

While chatting, Bahen cocks his head, listening to the winnower’s roar. “When it’s running properly, the machine sings,” he shouts enthusiastically. “It’s sort of like looking after a two-year-old though. If you turn your back, all sorts of bad things can happen.”

The slower pace and desire for simplicity shows in the final product. The Bahen & Co. range is kept focused at just four: House Blend, Almond and Sea Salt, Madagascar and Brazil. Even for those well-accustomed to eating dark chocolate, the taste of each bar is genuinely different and surprising. The care taken in the production is highlighted in a smooth, lustrous texture that carries a distinct fruitiness, thanks to the heirloom cacao origins. The overall taste is far gentler than expected for a 70 per cent cocoa chocolate; akin to meeting an old school friend for the first time after many years and discovering only one of you has really matured.

“Our goal is to produce the best quality chocolate in the southern hemisphere, if not the world,” Bahen says. “And I say that purely because of our proximity to some of the best and rarest genetics in the world. I want people to be able to hear the voice of the plantation in the chocolate we produce. A voice that’s been absent for too long.”

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