

Belgian Chocolate

*Bean-to-bar
Generation*



About the bean

Everything starts with the bean. Which serves as the main inspiration for the enticing story of chocolate. We have long forgotten its origin, all that remains is the lingering memory of its heady roasted fragrance. A bit like children, who think of fish as small square breaded creatures that live in the depths of the ocean because they have always eaten fish sticks. And we are guilty by default because we should never let anyone dictate what we should eat. That said, we were coaxed along all this time. By the industry, which made a concerted effort to brainwash us, imposing a completely absurd newspeak. Since then, we have all resorted to the same undignified lingua franca – the infamous ‘dark chocolate’ – to refer to this food of the gods, confusing everything, toying with percentages like children who compare their penis size. Bitterness? There is no such thing. The scandalous and awful crap that is produced by the agri-food giants is indeed bitter. We meanwhile choose to remember the wise words of Björn Becker, who – FYI – is not the son of two tennis players but one half of Mike & Becky, a couple whom you’ll meet elsewhere in this book: ‘Most people believe that a 70% chocolate must be bitter. But it’s the industry that has created this taste format, preferring to use less cocoa and more sugar because it’s cheaper and more addictive. They use badly fermented beans, a cheap raw material, and as a result their chocolate is almost inedible.’ So it has come to this.

Should we despair? Yes, we should... because the majority of all the world-renowned ‘Belgian chocolate’ has forgotten all about the fundamentals of an atypical product that links the North to the South (often in an unpleasant master-slave configuration, which reeks of exploitation).

But fortunately and happily the answer is also no. And that is what I set out to prove here: an uprising has since taken place, initiated by Pierre Marcolini (who co-wrote this book). We owe him a debt of gratitude. A new generation, the ‘bean-to-bar’ generation, has decided to shake up the cocoa tree. And we should all be eternally grateful for this. All thirteen of them create some mouth-watering concoctions. Without a pre-established model, as the process no longer exists, these gourmet whistle-blowers have set out to reinvent chocolate, from ‘M to Z’ (let’s agree that the ‘A to L’ is produced at the other end of the world).

In this book you will discover all thirteen of these chocolate makers, who each have their qualities and their defects, and sometimes they even overlap. What is equally exciting is that each of these chocolate makers are in different phases of their respective careers, which also influences their position. I was deeply moved by this generation and an easy convert.

What about you? Everything seems to indicate that chocolate is fast becoming the new wine. Some like the big reds, which are sold by the hectolitre, which leave stains and which are packed with sulphites. Others prefer a more enlightened and judicious approach, identifying the beans and the terroirs. Regression or progress? Forgetfulness or memory? Thoughtlessness or awareness? Who holds the keys to the kingdom? YOU DO. YOU are the one looking. And don’t tell us that we didn’t warn you.

Michel Verlinden



Bean-to-bar 2.0

This book originated from a strong desire to share a passion and a philosophy. Instead of glorifying Belgian chocolate, I wanted to tell a story, of a different type of chocolate - one that is made by chocolate makers. I wanted to highlight all the work that is done as part of this process, starting with the growing of the precious cocoa beans that lend chocolate such a unique taste, infusing it with incredible aromas.

I want to expand the 'bean-to-bar' movement, which I launched about twenty years ago, and which is becoming stronger every day, as a new generation of artisan chocolate makers rises to the fore. An interesting collective, in which everyone strikes out on his own, charts his own course. Because they don't teach you how to produce your own chocolate in a school.

I wanted this book to shed new light on what we do, on our profession. To introduce people to a tradition that is reinvented every day by these thirteen chocolate makers. Why thirteen? Because it's a lucky number perhaps, and will bring good luck to all the readers ...

Pierre Marcolini

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The beans' origin

Criollo

Mexico, Tabasco - Finca la Joya

Variety: An exceptional white Criollo that is very similar to a Porcelana.

Taste notes: Surprisingly bold acidity. Discreet bitterness.

Aromas: Floral citrus, dried fruit.

Specific characteristics: A very light chocolate made from Criollo Carmelo beans, that are white with delicate pink striping. When compared with a dark Forastero (Brazil) chocolate, you could be forgiven for thinking this is a bar of milk chocolate.

Indonesia, Java - state-owned farm

Variety: Old Criollo, Casse-clair

Taste notes: Sustained acidity.

Aromas: Spice, pepper and fruit, a smoky note that is typical of this variety.

Specific characteristics: A rare white Indonesian Criollo, which the Dutch brought to Java.

Venezuela, Aragua - Village of Chuao

Variety: Primitive Criollo

Taste notes: balanced acidity and bitterness.

Aromas: Exceptional cocoa, delicate mouthfeel, freshness, subtle violet colour, the epitome of cocoa.

Specific characteristics: Terroir between the mountains and the sea, which can only be reached by boat. This rare cocoa variety has been preserved over the centuries.

Peru, Alto Piura - Las Pampas Plantation

Variety: Criollo Blanco

Taste notes: Balanced

Aromas: sophisticated, citrus, cocoa and fermented taste.

Specific characteristics: Piura where most cocoa in Peru is grown.

Trinitario

Brazil, Bahia - Fazenda Leonida

Variety: Trinitario (Mix of Criollo and Forastero)

Taste notes: Balanced acidity, not very bitter.

Aromas: Tropical fruit (passion fruit, bananas) and dried fruit (nuts).

Specific characteristic: An exemplary farm, thanks to the owner who is a real perfectionist.

Cuba, Oriente - Terruno de Baracoa

Variety: An old Caribbean Trinitario.

Taste notes: Sustained bitterness without being excessive.

Aromas: Notes of dry wood, dried nuts, full-bodied, with hints of tobacco.

Specific characteristics: Bold note, during roasting the entire street smells of cocoa.

Vietnam, Mekong Delta - Ben-Tre Island

Variety: Trinitario

Taste notes: Balances bitterness and acidity.

Aromas: Red wine, dried fruit, cocoa.

Specific characteristic: Vietnamese cocoa farming has recently experienced something of an uptick and is very promising.

Madagascar, Sambirano - Ambaja Somia Farm

Variety: Trinitario

Taste notes: Nice acidity.

Aromas: cinnamon, red and yellow fruit, floral influence thanks to the Ylang-Ylang that is also grown on the farm.

Specific characteristics: The Sambirano Valley is renowned for its rare cocoa bean varieties, Criollo and Trinitario, making it an exception among African cocoa varieties.

Forastero

Cameroon, Penja Dark Mungo Plantation

Variety: Forastero

Taste notes: low acidity, marked bitterness.

Aromas: Citrus, earthy, alkaline.

Specific characteristics: A small experimental farm, which was established four years ago, and which is an exclusive supplier to Marcolini. The specific flavour of the Cameroon beans is due to the rich volcanic soil.

Nacional

Ecuador, Los Rios – Hacienda Puerto Romero

Variety: Nacional.

Taste notes: Nice balance of bitterness and acidity.

Aromas: Jasmine and orange blossom. The locals call this 'Arriba'. Nuts, red wine.

Specific characteristics: This bean has all the delicacy of a Criollo, with a dark violet colour, even darker than the Forastero.



Pierre Marcolini

Pierre Marcolini

And then suddenly, one day, Pierre Marcolini burst on the scene. So much for resting on one's laurels. The world of Belgian chocolate would never be the same again. 'Marco' decided he wanted to restore its reputation, to become the guardian of the temple. But first he made sure that the sanctuary was founded on some sturdy pillars, on the origins: bean-to-bar!

In the beginning

CAN CRAFTSMANSHIP BE RECONCILED WITH THE OPERATIONS OF A COMPANY WITH A GLOBAL PRESENCE?

‘Being an artisan, a craftsman has nothing to do with size. It’s a mindset. You can’t ever compromise on the raw ingredients. I believe that making chocolate means faithfully transposing all the flavours I identified on the plantation. In that sense, our company’s size is an advantage because when I visit a plantation to negotiate the delivery of four tonnes of raw ingredients, I know they’ll listen to me. In that sense, I also agree with Joël Robuchon, who thought that the difference between a two or a three-star restaurant could not be explained by technique only. It also was due to the access to better and different products. The other crucial element is people’s expertise. Our company employs eighty people, who produce two hundreds and ten tons of products ever year. You can continue to grow while focussing on craftsmanship but only if you don’t think of your workforce as a hindrance, as a disincentive. It’s actually quite the opposite: your employees are your added value, a unique capital you should cherish. Since the company was founded, we have continued to hire every year ... This leads me to think that our approach is the right one’, says Pierre Marcolini (fifty-four years old).

FAIR TRADE

‘We pay 5,000 to 7,000 dollars a ton, sometimes even up to 14,000 dollars ... whereas the market usually offers the planter 1,500 dollars’, he says. The notion of having the best possible relationship with the producer, so you can even intervene in the production process. And why not? An example? Cameroon, where Pierre Marcolini would like to use pepper instead of banana leaves, during the fermentation process. This is a crucial instant in the process, during which the flavours develop. What’s the purpose of this? To contribute to the expression of a terroir that is labelled with a protected geographical indication (PGI – Black Penja pepper).



**‘I need to make sense of things.
I cannot watch someone who is tasting
a chocolate with my name on it and tell
myself it’s just melted chocolate and
someone else made it. My idea is that you
should be able to taste chocolate with
your eyes closed and say, ah yes, that’s
a Marco chocolate’ — Pierre Marcolini**



BEAN-TO-BAR

'I had this idea as early as 1995, just after the pastry World Cup. Every time I went to Lyon, I would always stop at Maison Bernachon. It was an incredible experience. Entering this place was like travelling back in time. You stepped into an early twentieth-century chocolate shop. The aromas of roasted cocoa were simply mind-blowing. To be fair, it also made me feel terrible because I suddenly found myself thinking "I'm not a real chocolate maker, I'm just a Valrhona agent, I'm just perpetuating their taste experience, instead of creating my own." I couldn't bear it, I had to develop my own taste. So that is how I embarked on this adventure in 1999. At the time, people said I was "mad", because it was a huge investment after all. Then, when people became more interested in bean-to-bar, things changed ... my initial gut instinct was deemed "visionary".'

A LOST AND FOUND PROFESSION

Despite the challenges associated with the North-South dialogue and the fact that Marcolini is very much against uniform flavours, bean-to-bar is not that evident. It means questioning things: it requires you to relearn everything you know about your profession while also thinking about consumer habits. Pierre Marcolini remembers the following anecdote: 'In 2006, we had made considerable progress, gathering expertise and starting from the bean again. I thought we were past the stage of trial and error, uncertainty, despair and even doubt. During the Nocturnes du Sablon, a gentleman took me aside and informed me that he wanted to have a chat with me about my milk chocolate. I was expecting him to congratulate me. But instead he said: "I won't buy it ever again, because it's not the chocolate you used to make." I was crushed because the chocolate he never wanted to buy again was really my chocolate. This is an important event, as it made me better understand why some chocolate makers are not ready to take this leap. I think I'm lucky in that I have a certain recklessness, I'm a little crazy. You remember that famous Mark Twain quote: "They did not know it was impossible, so they did it".'

MOTIVATION?

'I need to make sense of things. I cannot watch someone who is tasting a chocolate with my name on it and tell myself it's just melted chocolate and someone else made it. My idea is that you should be able to taste chocolate with your eyes closed and say, ah yes, that's a Marco chocolate.'

CREATION?

'I love my iPad. I start from a trend book that has nothing to do with my industry. I have most of my ideas when I travel and when I'm in an airplane. I put together my collections in an abstract manner. These dreams then become nightmares for Laurent Soenen, my wingman. He understands me and knows that I expect. I describe what I want to him and he goes that extra mile to obtain it. We then discuss the results during tasting sessions.' The range has two speeds: the evergreen classics and the seasonal creations which use chocolate as a living matter, which can always surprise you with new notes.

THE DIFFERENCE?

Perhaps this is due to the fact that Pierre Marcolini is a pastry chef. His background gives him a different perspective on chocolate.

GROWTH

To give you an idea, in just eighteen years, Marcolini has expanded from 30 to 4,000 square metres. With different small workshops for moulage, enrobing, and confectionery. All Marcolini chocolate is produced in Haren (Brussels). The need to be recognised? This can't be excluded. 'Expansion is engrained in my DNA. I am a conqueror and I like the idea of contributing to Belgium's reputation as a chocolate country. To be fair though, I hadn't foreseen this. Everything started with a Japanese visitor who suggested that I open a shop in his country. I told myself that if we were capable of delivering chocolate to a country 10,000 km across the world without having to compromise on quality, the world was our oyster. It's an exhilarating thought. That said, we are a small-scale operation. There are forty Marcolini shops around the world. A company like Godiva has more than 5,000.'

JAPAN

The brand has nine shops and one hundred and thirty employees there. It is the third most popular chocolate brand in the country.

A KILLER?

Pierre Marcolini loves upheavals. He got rid of the ballotin box, replacing it with trays so consumers wouldn't think of turning out the contents of the box onto a plate to see 'whether the first tier is identical to the second'.

AND THE ROASTER?

A huge Petroncini, the Rolls-Royce of roasters, an amazing machine 'that you can adjust to a tenth of a degree'.

AN EMOTION?

'To find myself in the 2016 *Larousse Illustré*, even though they only dedicated two pages to me.'

IN THE FLESH?

Around Christmas you can always find Pierre Marcolini at the counter of his shop in Sablon. A long-standing tradition that allows him to 'gauge the temperature'.

Marcolini
Rue du Bassin Collecteur 4
1130 Haren

marcolini.com





My salted spread

INGREDIENTS

About 1 large jam jar

Preparation time : 15 min

- 10 g / 0.4 oz cocoa butter
- 100 g / 3 ½ oz cocoa nibs, freshly roasted
- 200 g / 7 oz black olive tapenade
- Espelette chilli
- Salt and pepper, milled

METHOD

Heat the cocoa butter in a saucepan.

Bring to 70°C / 158°F.

Mix with the cocoa nibs so as to obtain a pesto-like consistency.
Thoroughly blend with the tapenade.

Season to taste with espelette chilli, salt, and pepper.

Tips

An original condiment to accompany meats and fish.

This spread will keep for up to 2 weeks in the fridge.

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Pierre Marcolini

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Michel Verlinden

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