SWEET REVENGE: FAIR TRADE chocolate

BY ALAN PELL CRAWFORD

Gourmet-quality chocolate is bringing health and hope to cocoa farmers and their families.

The truth about how cocoa beans are grown, harvested and sold can make a box of Valentine’s Day chocolates a guilty pleasure—regardless of calories:

- 90 percent of the world’s cocoa—the main ingredient in our favorite indulgence—comes from farms of 12 acres or less, mostly in poor Third World countries in West Africa, Southeast Asia and Latin America;
- 200,000 children in West Africa alone are sold into slavery to work on cocoa farms, according to the United Nations Children’s Fund;
- Family farms scrape by on about $30–$110 per family member per year—the kids, working alongside their parents, rarely attend school;
- Tens of thousands of child laborers on West African cocoa farms work in dangerous conditions, clearing fields with machetes and applying pesticides.

No one has been looking out for these children or their families—until the past few years.

But today, thanks to a loose coalition of international, largely nongovernmental organizations, the lives of many cocoa farmers are beginning to improve. The tasty twist is that these improvements are being financed through the sale of “fair trade” chocolate—and not just any chocolate. The products whose sales are easing the burden of these farmers contain a higher percentage of cocoa than that of better-known rivals, giving them a seductively rich flavor. (See “Our Picks,” p. 54.)

That’s why you pay a little more for fair trade chocolate—and one reason the higher price is worth it. The second reason is that participating farmers keep a greater share of the profits, some of which goes to improve labor conditions and to build schools and install

From seedling to bean: 1. A cocoa seedling gets its start in a nursery. 2. Immature pods appear on tree trunks. 3. Ripe pods are harvested. 4. Broken open, a pod yields up to 50 beans.
sanitation systems. The third reason is the most important: The chocolate is made from cocoa beans that come from farms where children are not enslaved.

A GROWING MOVEMENT

Behind these efforts are the groups—humanitarian organizations, farmers' co-ops and chocolate producers—that make up the growing fair trade movement. Although the movement has existed for more than 40 years (coffee from the Netherlands was the first fair trade food product), fair trade chocolate products didn't exist until 2000, when Equal Exchange, an employee-owned, for-profit company in West Bridgewater, MA, began to sell hot cocoa mix under its Equal Exchange label. The product was a success, and the company began to expand. In late 2004, it introduced three new chocolate bars, including Fair Trade Very Dark, which contains 71 percent cocoa—meaning it has a far richer flavor than most commercially available competitors.

"The basic idea of fair trade," says Rodney North of Equal Exchange, "is for companies to buy only from farming co-ops so that small farmers, banding together, can command a higher price for their product. Unless they organize, they have no bargaining power and must accept whatever offer they get."

Co-op farmers can also decide how to divide up the profits through democratic means. "They might fund schools and clinics, or hire organic specialists to teach them more about sustainable agriculture," North says. In 2003, in the Ghanian village of Akomaden, for example, the 35,000 farmers of the Kuapa Kokoo collective opened the Nana Frimpong School, named for the co-op's founder.

As awareness of the plight of cocoa farmers and the quality of fair trade chocolate has increased, demand has mounted. "Now that there's a proven demand for fair trade products," North says, "the bigger companies, such as Starbucks and Proctor & Gamble, feel obligated to make at least a token effort, which we regard as a huge success. We want Mars, Hershey and everybody else to adopt this model."

LOOK FOR THE LABEL

All the players are in place, which should make it easier for the rest of the

HOW TO SAVOR FINE chocolate

Chocolate can be gobbled just as wine can be guzzled. Gourmands, however, say that to enjoy either to its fullest, it should be savored, which requires both knowledge and experience. Here are the basics of eating and appreciating a bar of fine chocolate:

1. Chocolate should be at room temperature; do not refrigerate it. (Fine chocolate will melt at body temperature.)
2. Holding the bar between your thumb and forefinger, snap it in half. There should be a clear, clean break. Cheap chocolate crumbles or is soft and mushy.
3. Inhale the aroma along the smooth surface of the break. A fine chocolate bar will smell like cocoa.
4. Taste a small piece at a time. Place it on your tongue, and press it against the roof of your mouth. (It should begin to dissolve.)
5. Chew and swallow. Good chocolate will leave no waxy presence; it will feel smooth, not grainy.
6. Appreciate the aftertaste, which should be slightly fruity.
7. Repeat steps 1–6 endlessly.

FROM BEAN TO SCHOOLHOUSE: 5. Beans are sorted by hand. 6. Then they're sun-dried. 7. Beans are bagged and sold to chocolatiers. 8. Profits pay for new schools and equipment.
What makes one chocolate better than another? The cocoa beans, plus the chocolatier's skill, and the quantity and quality of the other ingredients—cocoa butter, sugar, vanilla and lecithin, a soy derivative that lends smoothness. For milk chocolate, dry milk is added, which also affects flavor, mouth-feel and aroma.

Fair trade chocolatiers—listed at right—take more care than do mass-market candy makers. That's why their chocolate tastes richer than five-and-dime varieties. (The primary ingredient in most chocolate bars is refined sugar; for fair trade chocolate, it's usually cocoa.)

So, which are the best of the best? We tasted (did we ever!) dark and milk chocolates.

**THE RUNAWAY FAVORITE:**
* Green & Black's Darker Shade of Milk Chocolate, pleasantly glossy with a creamy texture and a rich flavor.

**AMONG DARK CHOCOLATES, TWO SHARED TOP PLACE:**
* Endangered Species Smooth Dark Chocolate Baby Marine Iguana Bar, as "smooth & creamy" as the packaging claims, going down as easily as milk chocolate yet with a robust flavor.
* Rapunzel Semisweet, with a pleasing aroma and full flavor, neither too bitter nor too sweet.

**A SOLID RUNNER UP:**
* Dagoba's New Moon. Remarkably smooth, but perhaps too bold for those who aren't dark chocolate die-hards.

We concluded with a "vanillin"-flavored Hershey's Milk Chocolate, finding it pale in color, grainy in texture, and oddly chemical in flavor. But conduct your own taste tests. There are worse ways to spend an afternoon.

**TEN TO TRUST**

**SOME OF OUR FAVORITE FAIR-TRADERS:**

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The use of different labels can be confusing, though it will become less so soon, since the different organizations have settled on one European label and one US label.

**GROWING CONSENSUS**

Today, even the biggest chocolate-producing companies in the world at last acknowledge that the farmers need help. "No one denies these problems," says Bill Guyton, president of the World Cocoa Foundation (WCF), formed in 2000. It includes among its members such heavyweights as Nestlé, Hershey Foods and Mars as well as Ghirardelli, Godiva and Starbucks.

Although WCF is not part of the fair trade movement, it, too, works to improve conditions, with an emphasis on methods that will increase member company's profits. "We're
working with 40,000 farmers in Southeast Asia to teach them sustainable agriculture and more sophisticated marketing methods,” Guyton says.

Even free-market economists who believe that prices should be established solely on the basis of supply-and-demand find little to criticize in fair trade’s efforts. “My only objection is the implication that anybody who isn’t part of the fair trade movement is part of a dirty, despicable business,” says Brink Lindsey of the Cato Institute in Washington, DC. “If you demonize the industry, you reduce demand, hurting the very farmers you want to help.”

That dire outcome is unlikely for two reasons. “First, fair trade chocolate will probably always be a niche market, and, second, there are companies that are not part of this movement that are still socially responsible,” says Michael Sheridan of Catholic Relief Services, who compares the market outlook to that of gourmet coffee. “The potential is great because of the product’s quality. When people buy candy bars to raise money for a high school band, they’re used to paying extra for a huge bar of chocolate that really isn’t very good. They gladly sacrifice quality to support a cause that they believe in. But with fair trade chocolate, you can support a cause and get high-quality chocolate.”

As North says, “In marketing, the product can carry the message, but the message can’t carry the product. In this case, we have a product of such superior quality that it can create serious demand.”

CHALLENGES AHEAD
The fair trade movement faces two challenges now. First, it needs to persuade more consumers to try the products, and the products can be hard to find. Second, more and more farmers must be convinced of the advantages of sustainable agriculture and of the wisdom of producing higher quality beans that command a higher price. “Farmers have already gotten much more sophisticated about their role in the marketplace,” says Pauline Tiffen, acting director of the Fair Trade Federation, an industry trade group.

Tiffen is a co-founder of the Day Chocolate Company, which produces Divine Bars. “We arranged for the Kuapa Kokoo farmers to receive a share of the profits from all sales, and we make the fact that the beans come from Ghana a brand attribute, so people will want to buy it the way they want wine or tea from a particular region. This was an outlandish notion when we introduced it into the chocolate world, but it’s not so outlandish anymore.”

APPETIZING ALTERNATIVE
As cocoa farmers become savvier and consumers realize how good the chocolate is, will fair trade solve the problems of the coca-farming world? Unfortunately, no. Will it help? Yes. Will it make people more aware of the problems, turning up the pressure on the chocolate industry to do more for the farmers? You have to hope so.

Finally, does fair trade offer an appetizing alternative to that gaudy, heart-shaped box of dime-store candies made with beans raised in the cheapest possible way at the lowest possible price? An alternative that tastes rich and goes down easy? Oh, yeah.

It’s true, women’s breasts are overexposed (to hundreds of known and suspected carcinogens every day).

Many beauty products you use every day—shampoo, nail polish and makeup—contain chemicals linked to breast cancer. And worse, it’s perfectly legal for cosmetics companies to sell these products to you. In Europe, beauty products are now barred from containing any chemicals known or strongly suspected to cause cancer or birth defects. At the Breast Cancer Fund, we’re urging U.S. cosmetics companies to voluntarily eliminate these chemicals from their products, too.

Please visit our Web site and join our call for smart laws and safe products.

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