

Terroir in a Bar

BY OWEN DUGAN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFF HARRIS

Wine has had a singular place in the West for centuries. It's been central to trade, agricultural and technological innovation and culture. Interestingly, because of its importance, its origins have been codified and valued for longer than other gourmet products.

Today chocolate, along with coffee and other goods, holds a similar esteem to wine in the market while also maintaining very broad appeal.

It doesn't grow where wine does, so its known history is more recent, and the origin of cacao really only became important in the past couple of decades. Half a century ago, chocolate purchases were made by brand, and then "milk," "dark" or whatever flavors were added.

Wines have a long history of being named for their specific places of origin, but what other goods is this true of? Now, at the upper reaches of quality, chocolate is getting the same treatment. Today you can purchase chocolate from a farm in a faraway land, and there will even be a picture of the farmer on the label. But while wines from Burgundy, for example, have proven ethereal and can command high prices, can we generalize about the quality of single-origin bars versus bars from a single country? Recent tastings show that the main distinction is that single-origin bars are more likely to be distinctive and tend to contain more surprising flavors, as compared with broader origin bars that blend different beans to produce unique flavor profiles.

Jeff and Chelsea Abella run Moka Origins, a chocolate and coffee company, out of a converted dairy barn on the Honesdale, Pa., campus of the Himalayan Institute. Fifteen years ago, they moved to Cameroon to further the institute's international development work. There, their passion for chocolate took off and by 2015 was an independent business. Jeff Abella points to a mindset that many craft producers share: Their work is "mission driven." As opposed to with most chocolate, which can come from obscure origins and which producers buy in great quantities from brokers, this production model is based on relationships with farmers and investments in quality control that are developed over time. This brings challenges akin to vintage variation in wine. "One year we were sourcing from a

PRALUS ORGANIC ECUADOR BAR 75%

(*chocolats-pralus.com, chocosphere.com and elsewhere; \$9 for 3.5 ounces*) Medium snap, chunky. Straightforward, leaning to the dark and savory side more than fruit. Tannins temper the heft. Drying finish.

MOKA ORIGINS TANZANIA 85% DARK CHOCOLATE

(*mokaorigins.com; \$9 for 2.4 ounces*) Crisp and astringent, with a good burst of stewed cherries and raisins. Quite tannic. Appetizing, thirst-inducing finish.

ASKINOSIE SAN JOSE DEL TAMBO ECUADOR 70% DARK CHOCOLATE

(*askinosie.com; \$10 for 3 ounces*) Medium crisp, with dark leathery chocolate up front, then brightens to honey and a tropical floral aroma. The finish drops off.



region in Uganda. It was this really chocolaty cacao. We were using it for about a year and a half. Then we got a second batch from that same farm,” Abella says. “They had different environmental conditions that affected their fermentation. It was very fruit-forward, but the quality was really high but inconsistent, so it challenged what we were trying to achieve. There’s a lot of singularity of the origin.”

But is single origin better? Producers of only those bars will say it is, and that occasional variations are part of the excitement. Abella is more ecumenical. “Quality and taste are subjective,” he says. “We make a bar from Ghana, from over 1,000 smallholder, Fairtrade farmers. I love the wealth distribution at that scale. When you look at the beans, they’re all very different; but when they’re combined, the chocolate is extraordinary. It’s actually one of our top-selling chocolates.”

Matt Caputo is CEO of Caputo’s Market and Deli, a gourmet retailer in Salt Lake City, and also co-owns A Priori, which imports and distributes Marou and many other fine chocolates and foods.

“There’s certainly a lot that can be gained through blending but you know, it’s just not happening that often,” Caputo says. “Narrowing it to the really respected producers of quality, in our portfolio of over 60 brands, almost none of them have any blended bars in their portfolio.”

Caputo is a wine lover, too, and can appreciate that in some cases, as with Bordeaux, blending is a way to enhance the final product. But he doesn’t see it happening with chocolate. “There aren’t a whole lot of examples where it’s like, no, this is more balanced and more amazing because it’s a blend, or where the blend was better than any of those chocolate bars individually.”

He and others concede that blended bars win out in terms of consistency and price. When agriculture and shipping and other factors are unpredictable, companies look to control manageable expenses. If a producer commits to one source, then they’re painted into a corner; even expenses like label printing can be greatly reduced by identifying national origin only.

The real fun of single-origin bars is, as with wine, the variety they offer. A wine can be about a singular place and stand out from all others, so too can a bar of chocolate. “Part of the excitement for me as a chocolate geek is exploring. Blends limit the opportunity for exploring a specific *terroir*,” Caputo begins. “What’s important when I taste a chocolate is it’s so singular, right? You could theoretically make it a blend with a more balanced flavor profile, the ‘desert island chocolate.’ But I hope I never have to just pick one chocolate and stick with it.”



**SOMA
SEMULIKI
FOREST
UGANDA
70% DARK
CHOCOLATE**

(somachocolate.com;
\$12 for 2.3 ounces)
Good snap, with up-
front banana shifting
to sweet figgy fruit.
Mouthwatering finish.

**CASTRONOVO
VALLE DE
LOS RIOS
PERU 70%
DARK MILK**

(castronovochocolate.com; \$14 for 2.2
ounces) Slightly thick,
with medium snap and
fast melt. Shows mild
tropical fruit and deli-
cate chocolate flavors.

**MAROU DAK
LAK 70% DARK
CHOCOLATE**

(marouchocolate.com,
caputos.com and elsewhere;
\$8 for 2.8 ounces) Super
crisp and thick. Slow out of
the gate, building to fairly
direct chocolate flavors split
between drying leather and
high-key fruit. Lingering
finish.