

Chocolate: the Bitter and the Sweet

Tragedy vs. Fairness in Making the “Foods of the God”

by Kai Huschke

Cocoa beans – the central character of the long story of chocolate – are actually not beans at all but seeds of the cocoa fruit. Cocoa trees grow in equatorial regions of the Caribbean, West Africa, Southeast Asia and Central and South America. They typically produce two harvests per year with each fruit yielding about forty seeds. Before there can be chocolate, the fruit must be harvested and fermented, the seeds/beans removed and dried, and then the dried beans bagged for processing—all of which takes a lot of labor. The average cocoa farm is a few acres in size and tended by a handful of workers. There are an estimated six million cocoa farmers around the world with another thirty-five million people whose livelihood relies on the production and distribution of cocoa beans and cocoa products like cocoa liquor, cocoa butter, cocoa cake and cocoa powder.

A 3,500-year enterprise, the consumption, cultivation and trade of cocoa was born in the central and western regions of the Amazon. Chocolate and the various products derived from cocoa are commonplace today, but it would be centuries before the masses enjoyed what Olmec, Aztec and Mayan royalty originally relished in drink form mixed with spices. Cocoa’s eventual global journey would come at the hands of the powerful trading powers Spain and Holland (15th to 17th century), who battled over the cocoa trade to satisfy demand of Europe’s social elite. Slowly the love of chocolate penetrated deeper into society with what would resemble a chocolate bar appearing in the mid 1800’s, serving chocolate confections to satisfy the sweet tooth of Europeans and Americans alike. Today, Europe and N. America consume over 60% of the world’s chocolate, now a \$75 billion industry.

The Bitterness of Cocoa Labor Practices

Though chocolate is enjoyed the world over, many cocoa farmers have never even tried chocolate. The business end of



Under-aged child working the production of cocoa in the Ivory Coast.
Photo Credit: International Labor Rights Forum

chocolate is still the realm of the super elite with over 80% of the world chocolate market controlled by a handful of corporations. The European cocoa trade lineage has stayed virtually unsevered as corporations in the United Kingdom, Holland and Switzerland continue to be the major players. Controlling nearly the entire chain from bean-to-bar these corporations have the power to dictate beneficial versus harmful trade and labor practices. Cocoa beans are a commodity and the tonnage is high enough (three million tons traded annually) that fractions of a penny have major financial implications. The most controllable cost variable is people –the cheaper the labor the cheaper the cocoa beans.

Our love of chocolate contrasts bitterly with labor abuses that are prevalent and egregious in cocoa farming and production (especially in West Africa), including a significant number of children whose basic human rights are routinely violated. From toxic pesticide exposure to 12-hour work days to carrying excessively heavy loads to the use of sharp machetes without adequate training, children as young as five years old are forced to work in terrible conditions. The pay for children is minimal to zero, and the most outrageous aspect of the cocoa industry is that children are being sold in slavery. Thousands of children (mainly between the ages of 12 to 16; source: Save the

Children) are being trafficked through countries like Mali and Burkina Faso, ending up primarily in the Ivory Coast. These children not only endure dangerous work conditions, but often are victims of mental, physical and/or sexual abuse.

In 2001 the Chocolate Manufacturers Association (CMA) and World Cocoa Foundation (WCF), aiming to end child labor in the production of cocoa, signed the Harkin-Engel Protocol (named after U.S. Representative Eliot Engel and American senator Tom Harkin). Article I of the protocol states that the chocolate industry’s charge is to take “immediate and effective action to secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labor”. However, after nine years, the problem still persists even though the giants of the chocolate world like Nestle, ADM, Mars and Hershey signed the pledge to “prohibit and eliminate” child labor in the cocoa industry.

Raising the Bar, Changing Behavior

The lack of compassion and unwillingness to take substantive action within the chocolate industry led to the formation of an activist campaign called “It’s Time to Raise the Bar”, which targets the Hershey Corporation. This campaign – driven by Global Exchange, Green America, International Labor Rights Forum and Oasis – stems, one, from a recent report by the Payson Center for International

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Development at Tulane University on labor practices in cocoa production, showing that little has happened to eliminate the use of child labor; and two, Hershey's first-ever Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Report which also shows Hershey doing little to correct problems in the industry such as human trafficking. The American based Hershey Corporation (annual revenues of \$5.3 billion) continues to lag behind others in sourcing from cocoa operations that are free of labor rights abuses, in transparency in its sourcing of cocoa, and in fair trade certification, all the while touting its social mindedness by donating (aka greenwashing) to aid programs in West Africa. Raise the Bar (www.raisethebarhershey.org) is meant to put serious pressure on Hershey to take direct responsibility for its own supply chains and end human rights abuses of children in the cocoa industry.

Fulfilling Chocolate Dreams: The Stories of Theo and Divine

Though the social injustices that permeate the industry are daunting, there are examples of conscious business and consumerism which have led to tangible impacts in improving the lives of many people. When we buy a bar of chocolate or cocoa powder for baking there are prompts that help us decipher which products have a higher standard. The USDA organic label is one assurance but the crucial one is that of fair trade. Third-party fair trade certifiers aim to make sure that companies practice putting people first: socially, economically and environmentally. Two shining examples that meld human compassion and equity into the chocolate recipe are Theo and Divine Chocolates.

Theo Chocolates (short for "Theobroma Cacao" or "food of the gods") was launched in 2006 by Joe Whinney – the first company to make, versus import, fair trade and organic chocolate in America. Whinney's path to founding a socially and environmentally sustainable chocolate company was blazed over a ten year period where he worked with cocoa



Cocoa farmers working with Theo Chocolate.
Photo Credit: Theo Chocolate

growers in Central America and Africa to improve environmental and social conditions surrounding cocoa production. A meticulous chocolatier, Theo is first of all environmentally and socially mindful in sourcing cocoa beans and other ingredients. They work directly with small farmers or farmer managed cooperatives in countries like Panama, Tanzania and Madagascar. They make sure that the premium they pay for both organic and fair trade directly benefits farmers and their communities. In addition, Theo spends time educating farmers on best practices for the production of cocoa beans to improve yields and incomes, and has introduced many – for the first time – to the joys of chocolate. Theo Chocolates carry IMO's Fair For Life fair trade certification. IMO is a third party fair trade certifier who verifies environmental practices are followed on farms, work environments are safe in both farming and processing, fair prices and wages are paid to farmers and workers, and no child or otherwise exploited labor is involved in farming and processing. IMO's Fair for Life also ensures the fair trade premium that Theo pays into a jointly administered project fund is democratically and appropriately used as a powerful tool for community development.

Divine Chocolate sprouted from the seeds of democratic opportunity. In the early 1990's a shift occurred in the cocoa market of Ghana creating an opportunity for farmer-run cooperatives to form. Besides delivering more profit to the farmers, the Kuapa Kokoo cooperative set out to expand the

involvement of women at all levels and to practice socially just farming. With partner NGO's the members of Kuapa Kokoo then voted in the late 1990's to enter the retail world of confections by producing their own chocolate bar to sell in the UK – Divine Chocolates.

Since then Divine has made its way to mainland Europe and the United States. As the majority shareholder, Kuapoa Kokoo (made up of over 50,000 farmers) uses dividends to improve its members' livelihoods and business of cocoa bean production, and funds social projects through its credit union. Divine Chocolates carry the TransFair label, a third party inspector and certifier that ensures that cocoa farmers receive a fair price for their harvest, direct trade links are created between farmer-owned cooperatives and buyers, farmers have access to affordable credit, and no slave or otherwise exploited labor is involved in cocoa farming. On the ground this translates to access to needed farm equipment, better schooling for children, community access to clean drinking water and receiving a premium price for cocoa beans.

A passion for chocolate, respect for people and planet, and building sustainable supply chains and healthy communities are what make Theo and Divine such delicious examples of what is possible in the complicated world of cocoa. Though legal change is needed to hold culprit individuals and corporations responsible for human rights abuses, we as consumers can play our part to improve the world of chocolate by buying only fair trade certified chocolate. It's past time that we properly honor the "food of the gods". ■

It's Time to Raise The Bar - www.raisethebarhershey.org
Theo Chocolates – www.theochocolate.com
Divine Chocolates – www.divinechocolate.com
Fair For Life – www.fairforlife.net
TransFair USA – www.transfairusa.org