

The Making and Tasting of Chocolate

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by Madeline Weeks

Tasting can be a great way to engage the senses. Tasting in groups can be a great way to engage people in a lively discussion. In the spirit of bringing action to the table, the Global Scholars Action Network partnered with the Gates Cambridge community to launch Dinner and Dialogue: The Making (and Tasting) of Chocolate. The discussion topic was “What is good chocolate?” from a multi-disciplinary perspective. After a 15-minute presentation led on the seed-to-bean-to-bar process of making chocolate, participants were invited to explore the concept of “good” chocolate starting with a sensory evaluation of different types of chocolate, including certified (i.e. organic, Fair Trade, vegan), single origins (i.e. Madagascar, Ecuador) and a spectrum of intensity (i.e. 70%, 80%, 85%). With the story of chocolate in mind, students embarked on a Chocolate Challenge to taste and evaluate chocolate.



While it can be tempting to simply pop a square of chocolate in your mouth or gnaw from a chocolate bar, the art of tasting is really a practice of mindfulness (see Headspace). Chocolate is such an incredible food because it can take you

on a journey, from the moment you open the package and observe the sheen of the chocolate bar, break off a square to hear the “snap,” and place it on the tip of your tongue. As the chocolate melts you’ll move through waves of sensation, starting with that first impression, then the core or real “essence” of the flavor, and finishing with the memorable aftertaste. That journey can depend on your mood, time of day, and what you ate beforehand. It is about the interaction between you and the chocolate in that particular moment.



We are not here to eat chocolate.

We are here to taste chocolate.

And there’s a difference.

Students took the first challenge to taste the first sample in complete silence. It actually takes a lot of concentration to taste chocolate, yet so often we consume without really thinking about that process. And it is easy to be swayed by a fancy brand name or how we think the chocolate should taste. Thus, all the chocolates in this exercise were sampled blindly to remove any preconceptions about taste.



Mindfully tasting

During this tasting students used flavor wheels developed by TCHO and Chocopolis as examples of the range of vocabulary that can describe flavor. In the wine industry, there is the Robert-Parker 100-point wine scoring scale; and in the coffee industry there is the Q Coffee System. Yet to my knowledge there is no standardized method for evaluating the quality of chocolate. I developed scorecards based on the wine and coffee criteria to assess the different sensory components like the aroma, first impressions, and aftertaste. Students then ranked each chocolate based on a 5-point scale then decided as a team whether the sample was “bad” “average” or “good.” The results are shown below.

Winner based on the “good” category:

- (1) Cocoa Loco 73%, Vivani 70% Ecuador, Seed&Bean 70% sea salt
- (2) Raw chocolate pitch dark 72%, Raw cacao confection Vanoffee
- (3) Vivani 85%, Green&Black 70%

Winner overall (on weighted score):

- (1) Cocoa Loco 73%
- (2) Vivani 85%
- (3) Vivani 70%, Seed&Bean 70% sea salt, Raw cacao confection Vanoffe



While the sensory evaluation is one component, assessing good chocolate is really much more complex. The social and environmental factors should be just as important a part of the decision. Unlike other agricultural commodities, cacao thrives in biodiverse environments when it has the protection of a shade canopy and is surrounded by pollinators like an insect called the midge. So cacao grown in the traditional, or organic manner, can arguably be in line with efforts of environmental conversation. Certifications that specifically target the environment include Bio-Siegel (Germany), Soil Association Organic Standard (UK), and the Organic Certification.

There is also the people component. 90% of the cacao in the world is grown on small-scale farms and yet these farmers receive only 3-5% of the final price of the product. This is where certifications like the Fairtrade Mark, Fair for Life, the Ethical Award, and independent seals like It's One World incorporate social standards like decent working conditions

and reinvesting in children's education. Each of the companies featured during the tasting matched at least one criteria of social or environmental "goodness" to varying degrees. Below is a snapshot of the different certifications of chocolates from the tasting.

Certifications tell one side of the story but usually not the complete picture. In fact, some of the best chocolates I know do not carry any certification. The challenge for many smallholder farmers, especially those in remote areas or without local structures of community organization, is the lack of information and market access to these certification schemes. Thus, it's important to think about the overall transparency when evaluating good chocolate. In general the more information you know about where the chocolate comes from, in terms of where it is grown and how it is made, the easier it is to evaluate the goodness of chocolate in its holistic sense. Terms like "bean-to-bar" and "single origin," and "direct trade" are all good indications of a more transparent value-chain.

"We realised that there was a lot more to good chocolate and the need to change peoples thinking in this area." University of Cambridge student

The final question remains: How do I support good chocolate? One of the best ways is to start with your own consumption choices. By the end of the session students were eager to find out where they could purchase their favorite chocolate. There are a handful of online retailers like CocoaRunners and Bean to Bar Chocolate and specialty chocolate shops in the UK like Paul A Young Fine

Chocolates Ltd and Cocoa Cubana. In Cambridge, the wholefood grocery shop Arjuna offers a nice selection. It can also be a fun social activity to discover great chocolates. One example of a social enterprise that is helping customers discover and support good chocolate is The Chocolate Garage in Palo Alto, California. This model supports "Happy Chocolate," with direct-trade and bean-to-bar chocolate that connects small cacao growers, artisanal chocolate makers, and consumers. Chocolate is about making happy connections and being conscious of the role you play in the overall value chain.

Tasting chocolate is an individual and collective journey, which begins the first decision of which chocolate to purchase. It is a process of discovery that can open us to new ways of thinking about how we interact with chocolate and with each other. And not to be forgotten, active tasting is about active being. It is about being present to fully appreciate the beauty, complexity, and captivating quality of chocolate.

"It was a taste-opening, multisensory experience that has heightened my awareness of the social context in which chocolate is produced. Each chocolate has its own story to tell, both with regard to its origins and its complex flavours. And the company was superlative!" Oxford University student

	Bio-Siegel	Ethical Award	Fair for Life	Fairtrade	It's One World	Soil Association	Vegan
Vivani 85%	●				●		●
Madecasse 80%			●				
Cocoa Loco 73%				●		●	
Raw Chocolate pitch dark 72%				●		●	●
Vivani 70% Ecuador	●				●		●
Green&Black 70%				●		●	
Madecasse 70%			●				
Seed&Bean 70% sea salt		●				●	
Raw Cacao Confection Vanoffe				●		●	●