

CHOCOLATE

Conscientious Consumption



Cacao beans drying in Madagascar, to be turned into chocolate by American company Madécasse.



By Owen Dugan

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Carla Martin came to her love of chocolate through deprivation: “This goes back to when I was a kid. I was raised by a couple of hippies and wasn’t allowed to have a lot of sweets. So anytime I could get my hands on chocolate, it was something exciting—it was an event.”

Another love, which she calls “communication, people and understanding the way people explain who they are and the

different choices that they make,” led her to study anthropology. Today, Martin is a lecturer in the Department of African and African American Studies at Harvard. But it took a while for the two passions to come together.

After college, Martin spent three years living off the coast of West Africa in the archipelago of Cape Verde, where as much as 70% of the world’s cacao is produced. From her host family, she learned that locals had often been exploited for labor, especially for cacao and sugar, in São Tomé and Príncipe.

“What was intended to be a period of indentured labor turned out to be a form of debt slavery where [workers] had very little hope of paying off their debt, very little hope of returning to Cape Verde,” she recalls. “I was in my early twenties and was shocked to learn that this was what had been going on in cacao production really forever. It got me thinking about the supply chain for chocolate and how little I understood about it.”

Labor in cacao farming includes ever-lessening pay, exploitation and even child slavery. In 2001, the biggest chocolate producers in the United States agreed to a Senate-mandated protocol to end what it called “the worst forms of child labor,” but deadlines are still being extended.

“There’s plausible deniability, talking about the responsibility of local actors whether national or at the community level,” Martin explains. “Basically, responsibility lies at everyone’s doorstep here. But a lot of it has to do with the industry’s inability or unwillingness to imagine really plausible alternatives.”

So alternatives are what she has been pursuing. “Chocolate became a sort of perfect hook,” she explains. “I created a class called Chocolate, Culture, and the Politics of Food. We do a deep dive into the politics of chocolate. We celebrate the wonderful chocolate products that we enjoy eating and we also look at the labor conditions of their production.”

In 2015, she founded the Fine Cacao and Chocolate Institute (of which she is now executive director), which identifies, develops and promotes people doing good work with great product. Finding the good stuff and recognizing potential are big parts of their work, as is educating at every level—from the field to the market—on what quality is and what it’s worth. It’s holistic: Better cacao brings more money, which improves lives and infrastructure and bolsters the market, but it takes a lot of work.

“We offer a three-day course that we’ve now taught in 16 countries, in multiple languages,” she says. “We teach people throughout the supply chain what the marketplace is looking for in terms of quality. We’re really just trying to introduce knowledge into a space that is typified by lack of education.” FCCI also runs the New England Chocolate Festival.

Many of Martin’s students conduct research, both at home and in the field, and some even help fledgling companies with things like social media.

So while it is hard to look bad practices squarely in the eye, Martin is hopeful. “There are people doing exactly the work that needs to be done,” she says. “They’re showing the big companies,

'Look, this can be done differently. There are alternatives.' That gives me great optimism."

Martin can rattle off seemingly endless names of companies doing good work at every stage, all over the world. Madécasse, based in Madagascar, is "reimagining the way the supply chain could look." Zorzal Cacao in the Dominican Republic, a region known more for commodity cacao, "developed an environmentally responsible model that also has a positive impact on local labor. They have a colleague in the D.R. called Öko Caribe, where they're paying more for the cacao, producing it at a higher quality, educating local farmers, helping them diversify what they plant so they're less subject to the volatility of the marketplace." Of Dandelion Chocolate in San Francisco, Martin says, "It's in their business model to pay more for cacao. It's quite literally how they do business." Dengo in Brazil pays a significant premium "for any cacao that meets a certain level of quality, even if they're not ready to use it."

When I confessed my fondness for Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, she laughed and said, "I share that." How do you justify it? "This is the reality that we live in," she observes. "I also justify my Google Android habit, iPhone habit. We're all implicated in any of these supply chains, and the truth is, these companies are not doing nothing. It's just that the way they're acting is not as effective as it should be. They're not taking the kinds of actions that would allow for considerable change."

Owen Dugan is features editor of Wine Spectator.

