

A Taste of Paradise

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WHEN TALK TURNS TO CHOCOLATE, Tobago rarely jumps to mind. But this small island off the Venezuelan coast was once home to dozens of thriving estates planted with indigenous Criollo cacao trees. Though Criollo beans are celebrated for their rich, complex flavor, they are highly susceptible to disease. Most of Tobago's Criollo trees were lost to a devastating blight in 1727, nearly ending the island's cacao production. Within a few decades, the heartier Forastero variety was introduced to Tobago's sister island, Trinidad, where it mingled with the remaining Criollo trees to yield a natural hybrid called Trinitario.

By the early twentieth century cacao—Trinitario, in particular—was Tobago's leading agricultural commodity. The King's Bay Propagation Station offered small farmers subsidies for clearing their land and provided seedlings for planting. The island even had a cooperative fermentary. Then, in 1963, Hurricane Flora ripped through Tobago, destroying not only most of its cacao trees, but also the coffee, banana, and coconut plantations so crucial to Tobago's economy. The hurricane, arriving not long after Tobago's independence from the U.K., prompted the new government to turn its back on the country's agrarian past and embrace an economic future based on oil and natural gas. By 1970, Tobago's rich history of cacao production was a thing of the past.

Duane Dove's ancestors came to Tobago from Scotland in the mid-eighteenth century. As a young boy Duane had worked on his family's cocoa estate. At six hundred meters above sea level, the property looks out over the island's beautiful rainforest and to the Atlantic Ocean beyond. After Flora's devastations, the family abandoned the plantation. Duane eventually left the island to attend culinary school in Canada and train as a sommelier. He began to specialize in the pairing of fine rum with chocolate, which got him thinking about his family's abandoned cocoa estate. When he returned to Tobago for a visit, he found the property overgrown with bamboo, an imported tree whose sticks the local farmers used for training yam vines on the island's steep, terraced hillsides.

In 2005, determined to reverse decades of neglect and bring cacao back into production, Duane established Tobago Cocoa Estate W.I. Ltd. He hired many of the workers he had known in his childhood, drawing on their knowledge of

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artisanal methods. The first challenge was to clear the forty-five-acre property of bamboo and other brush—a project that is still ongoing. Tobago Cocoa Estate now has twenty-two acres planted in eleven different strains of Trinitario beans. Duane works with the Cocoa Research Institute in Trinidad to develop local hybrids, concentrating not only on characteristics of heartiness and yield but also, primarily, on taste. His plan is to turn the plantation into a thriving agrotourism center, including a café where visitors can taste various cocoa products. For now he opens the estate for walking tours that highlight the beautiful tropical plants interplanted with the cacao trees, including pomegranate, soursop, West Indian cherries, mangoes, and cashews. He has also constructed a clay oven for baking cassava bread from the plants growing on the property.

The cacao pods are all hand harvested, then fermented in specially designed boxes and sun-dried in the yard. After drying, the beans are shipped to Roanne, France, where master chocolatier François Pralus roasts, mills, presses, conches, and packages the chocolate under contract to Tobago Cocoa Estate. The company then distributes and markets it, mainly in Europe (approval from the Food and Drug Administration to sell the chocolate in the U.S. is pending). The bars—the only single-estate cacao from Tobago in the world—are 70 percent pure cacao, with no vanilla added to mask the flavor. The taste is therefore extraordinarily deep and pure. Sweetening with brown sugar instead of white keeps the flavor earthy.

Last August the Tobago single-estate chocolate bar won the Great Taste Award from London's Guild of Fine Food. Duane is thrilled at this recognition, but even more important is the reclamation of his family's land and the return to Tobago of the island's finest agricultural crop and, with it, an important piece of Tobago's culture and history. Although Duane Dove won the competition for taste, he is now engaged in another competition, this one with the wild parrots that descend in raucous flocks to steal the sweet, ripe cacao berries. True to his artisanal practice, Duane laboriously nets each individual pod and uses falcons to scare the parrots away.

But Duane Dove is not just reclaiming the tastes and practices of the past. He is also staking a claim to Tobago's future. Trinidad and Tobago's oil and natural gas resources will not last forever; nor is it wise to base a national economy entirely on fickle industries like energy and tourism. Cocoa production isn't exactly life in paradise. It is hard work laboring in the heat, contending with invasive species, rapacious birds, and occasional hurricanes to produce something pure in taste and completely natural. Which may define life in paradise after all. ●



Dana Goldstein