

the Art of Eating EDWARD BEHR

A Different Take on Chocolate: Mexican-style from Taza (No Conching)

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Working in rented space in an industrial building near chop shops in Somerville, Massachusetts, Taza Chocolate is not a remelter of purchased chocolate – a high craft of its own as practiced by certain celebrated chocolatiers. Rather, it is one of a handful of superior new U.S. producers of chocolate who work in small batches, starting with cocoa beans. Taza, which sold its first bar in 2007, processes minimally; it aims at maximum aroma. Above all, what sets it apart is that it doesn't conch.



Conching gives most chocolate its characteristic smooth texture, and it has an important influence on taste. Low-end chocolate is conched for a day or less; a high-end European bar might be conched for as long as five days. The conching machine – the original, designed by Rudolphe Lindt in 1874, was shell-shaped, hence "conch" -- repeatedly works the soft mass of ground cocoa transforming it through heat, movement, and exposure to air. The chocolate gains a creamy smoothness, while some of its inherent acidity evaporates. Yet the exposure to air also takes away some desirable aromas. Taza works outside the European tradition. Instead Alex Whitmore, one of the two Taza partners, was inspired by the chocolate he encountered in southern Mexico. Taza's texture remains slightly coarse, because of the cocoa itself and because spread throughout is a fine sand of sugar. (Similar chocolate is made in Modica in Sicily.) In your mouth, the sugar is the last part of the chocolate to melt, leaving an unusually sweet aftertaste. Even Taza's strongest bar, at 80 percent chocolate, tastes sweeter than most other dark chocolate. The large compensation is an unusually intense, especially fruity flavor.

The cacao trees that produce the beans are nearly all Trinitario: hybrids of the robust Forastero variety and the rare, superior but disease- and insect-susceptible Criollo. Taza's cocoa beans are organically and sustainably grown and purchased directly, mostly from one small farmer co-op in the Dominican Republic.

At harvest, the beans together with the sweet mucilaginous pulp surrounding them are taken from their curious football-like pods and fermented with naturally occurring yeast, a key step that creates much of the basic flavor of any chocolate. An alcoholic fermentation is followed by an acetic (distinctly vinegary) one, the times, temperatures, and equipment all affecting the complex changes and final quality. Rather than the three- or four-day fermentation usual in Mexico, Taza prefers six-to-seven days for more fruit flavor. And rather than the common fast drying for one to two days, often in the sun, Taza requires slow drying in the shade over about eight days to preserve aroma and give a less acetic result, all the more important when there is no conching. "It takes a lot of time and trips to the farm and effort, study, to learn about flavor," Whitmore said. "Most of what I know about the

post-harvest I learned from people with years of experience. I'm still learning." As with the craft of producing other foods, the best flavor results not from a single step but from a superior raw material and care all along the way.

In Somerville, the beans are roasted more lightly than they would be in Mexico, again to preserve fruit flavor, just as a lighter roast of coffee beans does. The Barth Scirocco roaster, bought used like the rest of Taza equipment, employs hot air. A winnower breaks the roasted beans and blows off the outer shell, and it separates out the hard, bitter germ within each bean. The broken bits, called nibs, are ground fine between the granite stones of two refurbished molinos. Like the stones of a grist mill, only on a much smaller scale, these wear down in use and must be periodically dressed: the radiating pattern reincised in the grinding surface. Whitmore himself does that.

Vanilla is the flavor most complementary to chocolate, sometimes added in artificial form. Here, whole organic vanilla beans are ground with the nibs. Then organic sugar goes in and grinding continues. The sugar, bought from a Brazilian mill that is part of a green cane project, is pale tan in color and contributes a light cane flavor. Cocoa beans naturally contain about 50 to 55 percent cocoa butter, and the last step before molding any chocolate is tempering, which determines the texture of that cocoa butter and gives a chocolate bar its characteristic crispness. At Taza a small machine precisely raises, lowers, and again raises the temperature so the cocoa butter sets with a firm, even crystalline structure. The molded chocolate breaks with a snap.

Taza means cup. In Mexico, as in pre-Columbian America, most chocolate is consumed as a liquid, hot chocolate being drunk in southern Mexico the way coffee is in other places, and Taza produces disks for making hot chocolate. For the bars meant for eating, the chocolate paste is ground in the molinos and is further milled between the granite rollers of small machines meant to be marzipan refiners. The stones' imperfections, as opposed to the perfect smoothness of steel rollers, somewhat reduce the size of the sugar particles while preserving the rustic texture Taza wants. Whitmore says that more milling to make the particles smaller would take away flavor.

The four Taza eating bars come in 60, 70, and 80 percent chocolate from the Dominican beans and 75 percent from some particular beans from Chiapas. (The number refers to the percentage of actual cocoa mass in the chocolate, as opposed to sugar, perhaps milk, or other ingredients.) That last bar, from old, rare strains of cacao, has a distinct flavor of walnut skins, including their astringency. Usually I prefer 70 percent chocolate, but Taza's grains of sugar make the chocolate seem sweeter than it is, and I prefer the 80. I've tasted this side by side with chocolate from other new, small-batch makers, who all work in the conventional conched style and with two international points of reference. Taza was more vivid and intense than any of them, full of the flavors of small red fruits, though a little wildly fruity and perhaps not as clean and focused. The fruit is underlined by a strong current of vanilla and the sweetness from late-dissolving sugar. And when I made hot chocolate with the 70 and 80 percent bars (because they're less sweet than the disks), a floral side came out, to me jasmine. It's not that conching is a mistake. Specific results reflect variables of time, temperature, and different machines, and for most people probably the conched texture is unbeatable. But you can't fully understand chocolate flavor until you've tasted the unconched kind.