

Manufacturer gets down to the nitty-gritty with his chocolate production

By Chris Mahoney
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Alex Whitmore gets hate mail from chocolate lovers.

His line of sweets is certified organic. Each morsel that leaves [Taza Chocolate](#)'s Somerville plant is little more than cacao beans, cane sugar and cocoa butter. The beans are direct trade, bought straight from farmers in Central and South America. There's minimal processing: The beans are roasted, stone-ground, mixed with other ingredients, molded, wrapped and packed on site by employees Taza draws mainly from the neighborhood and who work in a funky industrial building, side by side with micro-businesses ranging from a T-shirt manufacturer to a fencing studio.



Alex Whitmore, founder of Taza Chocolate in Somerville, manufactures a line of chocolates using a method of stone grinding he observed during a trip to Central America.

So his chocolates are earthy-crunchy. The thing is, they're also gritty.

And some of them are spicy. Taza's line includes Chocolate Mexicanos, little wheels of chocolate that feature such taste sensations as chili peppers on top of the chocolate's markedly gritty texture. If you're looking for Lindt, you're clean out of luck.

"People who love this chocolate really love it. And people who hate it really, really hate it," said Whitmore, 32, who founded Taza Chocolate in 2006 after a stint at Zipcar.

The chocolate (which isn't cheap, a chocolate bar costs \$6.50, and the Mexicanos are \$4.50 per wheel) causes such a pitched reaction in some quarters that some folks feel compelled to write in and complain.

"I like that the product has that quality. It means I'm doing something effective," he said.

A visit to Oaxaca, Mexico, in 2005 jazzed Whitmore on the traditional Central American approach to chocolate to the point that he was sure it would find appeal in the United States. And apparently, enough people like the chocolate to the point where Taza's revenue doubled from \$500,000 in 2008 to a little more than \$1 million in 2009, and Whitmore expects to expand Taza's physical plant within the next four months from 4,600 square feet to 9,600 square feet.

Taza is a “bean-to-bar” chocolate manufacturer. The company, which employs 22 in its Somerville facility, processes beans directly into chocolate — instead of melting it to use as coating or molding it into confectionaries — using a method of stone grinding that Whitmore observed during his trip to Mexico.

Whitmore graduated from Vassar College with a bachelor’s degree in anthropology and was familiar with the history, people and traditions of Central and South America, but it was his trip to Oaxaca that opened his eyes to their unique approach to chocolate. Much the same way that micro-roasters of coffee proliferate in some parts of the United States, the preparing of cacao beans in Central America varies almost from house to house. Families roast and grind chocolate differently to sell by the bag, and chocolate is consumed as a hot drink. (“Taza de chocolate” means “cup of chocolate” in Spanish.)

Whitmore, who was working at the time as a fleet manager for car-sharing service Zipcar, came back to the United States with the thought of starting a cafe-type business. He brought his idea to Larry Slotnick, who managed Zipcar’s Boston operations and was gearing himself up to leave Zipcar to explore a new venture, but the thought of a “chocolate cafe” didn’t immediately appeal to Slotnick, who’d never worked with food before. When Whitmore changed his concept to manufacturing, Slotnick was sold.

“It was much more compelling to start a little factory,” said Slotnick, who said he agreed to sign on to the new venture with a few conditions, chief among them was that the business had to engage in direct trade, and operations had to be organic and sustainable.

Whitmore and Slotnick — along with Whitmore’s wife, Kathleen — set up shop in 1,700 square feet on the second floor at 561 Windsor St., an industrial park near Union Square in Somerville, using money from friends and family. The company sold chocolate as a third-party reseller (Whitmore and Slotnick said they wanted to figure out the best ways to peddle chocolate) while Whitmore taught himself to grind and make chocolate using traditional grinders he imported from Mexico.

On Valentine’s Day 2007, Taza Chocolate officially went on sale.

“I was freaking out,” Whitmore said. “I’m selling gritty chocolate. No one is doing that. I was like, people are going to hate this.”

Taza held an open house to introduce the neighborhood to its wares, and all 800 bars that the factory produced for the event were sold. Whitmore and Slotnick began pounding the pavement for retail outlets, taking the the chocolate to local shops in the Somerville and Cambridge area. Small, locally owned grocers and food stores in the Northeast still represent the lion’s share of Taza’s trade. The chocolates are also for sale in food co-ops, specialty wine stores and in Whole Foods markets.

Christina Theophanis, one of the manager’s at Dave’s Fresh Pasta in Somerville, said the chocolate is a popular item at the store.

“I remember going, ‘Oh, this is interesting,’” she said. “We’re used to the smooth, Belgian-type chocolates, so this is definitely different.”

She said Whitmore sponsors events at Dave's, so patrons are able to "put a face with the chocolate," she said.

"People like that this is done in a traditional way, and that it's done locally," Theophanis said.

Last year, Whitmore participated in InnerCity Entrepreneurs' 'StreetWise MBA'TM program, designed specifically for urban small businesses and taught by adjunct faculty members from local business schools. Whitmore said the experience, and the interaction with other entrepreneurs, bolstered his confidence.

"You can really build whatever you want to build, and you don't have to follow any rule book," he said.

For its first year Taza worked out of its cramped, 1,700-square-foot space, and Whitmore contracted to use J.P. Lick's coffee bean roaster during off hours to roast his cacao beans. Last year the company bought its own equipment and expanded. This year, Taza plans to more than double its space to increase its chocolate-making capacity beyond the small batches it makes now. Whitmore would not say how much the build-out will cost, but said it will be funded through internal operations.

Part of Whitmore's plan with the expansion is to include a retail component, which would rely on people visiting Taza's relatively out-of-the-way location, but Whitmore said he isn't worried. "It's not hard to get people to come to a chocolate factory," he said.