



CLAUDIO CORALLO makes his chocolate on-site in Africa. He even hand-peels his pods. 'No one does that!' says a chocolate expert.

Getting hooked on 'wild' chocolate

They may not be for everyone, but these dark bars are causing a buzz among connoisseurs

BY PAMELA CUTHBERT • "The analogy I like to make is that if you've been eating Wonder Bread all your life and someone hands you a piece of freshly baked rustic bread, you might say 'Ick!' And it's just because you've never had anything like it," says James Clark, who is importing Claudio Corallo chocolates into North America and working on opening a retail boutique in Seattle this summer. Made by a rebel Florentine off the coast of the world's notorious cocoa-producing zone, West Africa, these dark creations are attracting the attention of connoisseurs for their profoundly chocolatey flavour and raw originality.

David Castellan takes chocolate from bean to bar in his Toronto-based Soma Chocolate shop. Lately, he has added Corallo's bars of 100 per cent and 75 per cent *Puro Cacao* to what he calls his "small, curated list" of brands. Even before he tasted Corallo chocolates, Castellan was hooked—on the tale of the man who makes them.

Corallo, an agronomist who developed a passion for Africa through childhood reading, has worked on the continent for 35 of his 58 years. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, he rejuvenated a coffee plantation deep in the jungle using fair-labour practices and developing a strong bond with his employees. He survived rebel attacks, dysentery and a disease that nearly left him blind. Finally, in the mid-'90s, war forced him and his family to find a new home in São Tomé and Príncipe. A decade earlier, Corallo had "fallen in love," as he explains on his website, with the cocoa and coffee beans of the country, which is a former Portuguese colony consisting mainly of two tiny volcanic islands in the Gulf of Guinea.

São Tomé and Príncipe are where Africa's

first cacao trees were planted. Nicknamed Claudio of Príncipe, Corallo and his small crew make the brand-name chocolate on-site. Generally, cacao is exported and the chocolate processed elsewhere—often in the U.S. and Europe. "Part of the beauty of the project is that he's there for all of the steps. That's the ideal," says Castellan.

Corallo chocolates are inimitable for any number of reasons, starting with the type of bean grown, *Amelonado forastero*, which is the original variety of cacao brought to Africa from South America in the early 19th century. It's comparable to an heirloom variety of tomato. Corallo oversees careful tending to the plantations (no fertilizers, he advertises) and, by establishing self-help co-operatives and a hands-on approach, instills a sense of ownership among his growers. Next, he hand-peels his pods. "No one does that!" exclaims the usually subdued Castellan.

Chocolate, like wine, requires fermentation of the main ingredient. The standard is to ferment beans for two days to a week, but Corallo has figured out how to stretch that to as many as 17 days in order to develop the best of the natural flavours and reduce bitter elements. The Corallo touch also comes through in the absence of the typical finishing process, conching. A conch is a refining and heating machine that smooths the rough

cocoa paste. Corallo prefers his raw; his beans are coarsely ground, and the bars granular in texture.

They're not for everyone. Kerstin Roos of Kerstin's Chocolates in Edmonton says that when introducing the bars, "I often tell people to pay attention more to the flavour. Once they get the wild flavour of it, they start to enjoy it."

"Claudio is trying to hold up a mirror to the origins—trying not to over-process," explains Clark. These origins—West Africa and especially the Ivory Coast—where nearly half of the world's cocoa beans are grown today, are generally anonymous, buried in the uniform flavours and processes of chocolate giants such as Hershey and Nestlé. But in 2001, the major companies were under U.S. political scrutiny after reports revealed use of child labour in the cacao plantations. To head off punitive legislation, the industry agreed to voluntarily clean up labour practices by 2005. That deadline came and went and a new deadline was set for July 2008. Will anything change? In the meantime, the controversy continues, especially after links were drawn between cocoa profits and funding for a recent and brutal civil war in Ivory Coast.

For a chocolatier who sources carefully, fair-trade options from western Africa are improving. In addition to stocking Corallo's singular brand, Castellan got fair-trade cocoa beans from Ivory Coast this week—a first. M



TODAY'S SPECIAL... CAFFEINATED CHIPS

Combine your bad habits in one food with Engobi, a snack that not only gives you a little hit of junk food but also blasts you with 140 mg of caffeine, almost twice as much caffeine as that found in energy drinks. Made from corn, rice, wheat and sugar, Engobi chips contain a third of the daily recommended limit of caffeine, yet they're cheaper than energy drinks. They come in cinnamon and lemon flavours.