

El Rústico

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I sit in the upstairs of the building next to Zingerman's with a sheet of paper in front of me, lines dividing into eight sections, each filled with a different kind of chocolate. The man at the front of the room, the one with a short gray beard and wearing a tan Askinosie Chocolate shirt, is Shawn Askinosie. He used to be a civil defense lawyer. Now he does chocolate. In front of the tasting morsels is a small paper cup filled with hot chocolate. "A little amuse-bouche to get your taste buds going," says a slight woman from the front of the room, dispensing the liquid as she talks. This is Duff, Zingerman's full-time chocolate seller, buyer, and all around genius. "Shawn brought us some cacao powder a while back that he was hoping to sell, but the particle size was way too big. Grace and I helped him refine it down into what you are drinking right now." The hot chocolate is sweet and bold at the same time. I find myself searching for every last dreg of the drink.

The first box is filled with two small, hard brown beans. In order to eat them, the thin shell has to be carefully cracked and the nibs extracted. My first attempt is a failure and it crumbles in my hand. However, I taste it anyway and my mouth is immediately confronted by the dry bitterness of the roasted cacao bean. Chewing the fragment as it further dissolves in my mouth, the slight hint of chocolate gently emerges to reward my efforts.

"I won't use beans from anywhere I haven't been myself," says Shawn as he shows us a picture of himself with farmers in Mexico. Engulfed by large palm trees, they seem an island in the midst of a green sea. The next picture is of Shawn and a man

tattooed across his nose and cheeks. In the man's right hand is a machete. "He gave me that machete," Shawn says. "You know, those tools are essential to their life. I still have it."

The next food we taste is chocolate liquor: a pure, grainy syrup that is somehow more bitter than the beans. Shawn takes us on a slideshow tour of his factory while we savor the liquor. The factory he bought in a rundown neighborhood of Springfield, Missouri, wasn't suitable to be an outhouse, much less a chocolate factory. It consisted of an earthen floor and a roof held up by leaning wood beams. After buying the necessary equipment and renovating the facility, he and his family had their own business.

We slowly go through two chocolates from Del Tambo, Ecuador. The first is a seventy percent cacao bar which sweetens on the tongue, because of the nibs and liquor. The second is a seventy-five percent bar, with nibs spread generously onto the back, making the bar into a crunchy mouthful with two different flavors of deep dark chocolate at once. "This is my favorite of their bars," says Duff from the back of the room.

The next chocolate we taste is a seventy-six percent chocolate from the Soconusco region of Mexico. Hanging on the wall behind Shawn is one of the white burlap bags used to bring the beans from Mexico to the United States. He shares his business philosophy as we try to make the chocolate last as long as possible. Stake in the Outcome, a financial strategy originating from economist Jack Stack, gives more back to the communities dealt with than Fair Trade. Shawn makes sure that the farmers he deals with get cash straight from him, even bringing them chocolate made from their own beans to taste. "My wife thinks I'm crazy for doing my business this way, especially in these hard times." But he has a plan to overcome his economical woes. "The first step,"

he says, “is to overcome the fear. Then we need to fight. We also need to serve each other, even if it means taking money out of our own pockets. The final thing we need to create is hope. This kind of hope,” he says, showing pictures of children from Askinosie’s Chocolate University program. These children are mainly from the Hotel Missouri in Springfield, one of the largest homeless shelters in the state. Shawn goes into their elementary classrooms and speaks about entrepreneurship, then brings them into the factory to tour and to make and taste chocolate. Going farther, Shawn has connected them as pen pals with a school in the Davao region of the Philippines, the third origin he gets beans from.

The seventy-seven percent chocolate he has brought from there has a distinct smoky flavor, along with the sinuous dark flavor of the cacao. “I had to work by far the hardest to get this source,” he says. “But the two years I spent getting into the country and finding farmers that I could work well with were worth it.” A picture of Shawn smothered in the children of an elementary school there follows. Only his head, capped with an Askinosie hat, is visible.

The seventh item we taste is not truly chocolate, but thirty-four percent cacao butter white chocolate. Its sweetness shocks my system, but as the small disks melt in my mouth, I revel in the sugar and cream found there. This chocolate is what the children of Chocolate University use to make peppermint bark every holiday season, getting to take it back to their family.

The final box contains what we all came for: El Rústico, whose packaging features both the cursive of Zingerman’s and the sunburst A of Askinosie. The bottom left corner shows a chocolate bar dancing hand in hand with a vanilla bean, the signature

ingredient of the bar. It is an amalgam of seventy-percent chocolate packed with crunchy sugar crystals and actual vanilla bean from Papua New Guinea. Enduring eight different prototypes to get the exact balance of vanilla bean and chocolate, the finished product is finally here. The shadowy bitterness of the cacao mixes with the crisp crunch and bright sweetness of the sugar, while the vanilla bean's smoothness contrasts the two. It melts and dissolves on my tongue, disappearing with a bitter-sweet goodbye.