

CAFÉ CULTURE

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# magazine

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# The ultimate sweet spot

When Alice Rendle (left, main picture), of Edgcumbe Tea and Coffee Company in West Sussex went to visit the Tobago Cocoa Estate in the Caribbean recently, it was with one key intention – to learn more about chocolate and the production techniques used in this fascinating industry. Here, she tells us more about her trip.

## A must-have beverage

The visit involved a long drive into the rainforest region of Tobago, with exciting stories of crocodiles and the danger of an ambush to speed us on our way! We found ourselves in the middle of the forest, driving along a red-soiled path and surrounded by trees with strange looking fruit resembling rocket grenades – or the cacao pod to those in the know.

Next year, our company will have been established for 30 years and, although we specialise in premium coffees and teas to the catering market, we are always on the look-out for the newest trends in our industry and chocolate as a drink is now a 'must have' in any serious catering outlet.

The British have always loved the 'treat factor' of hot chocolate, and it is fast becoming a premium product, along with speciality teas and coffees. The increase in consumption of chocolate has led to many caterers wanting to find out more about how the raw product is produced, and I realised that there were not many people who could tell me much about this, so a visit to a country of origin beckoned!

Tobago is ideally suited to growing the cocoa tree as it is situated near the Equator and has perfect soil and climatic conditions for this crop.

The Tobago Cocoa Estate was founded by Duane Dove, a trained chocolate 'sommelier' who has already gained a reputation in Europe and the Caribbean. His vision was to use his expertise to start a chocolate estate in his home country of Tobago, where the cocoa industry had been in decline for many years. There are several old estates in Tobago that hark back to a more affluent time, when the industry was a key part of the island's fortunes. Many of them are now in a dilapidated state, and Duane is passionate about reinvigorating this part of Tobagoan heritage.

When I visited the estate, it was about to harvest its 2010 cocoa crop, and we were able to see the pods in an almost ripe state. The estate also supports many other crops - from coffee, ginger, chilis and even the odd okra plant - all grown organically. This is truly a mixed farm, run on sound ecological grounds, and I was impressed by the time and effort given to communicate the message of sustainability.

## Sweet spot

Chocolate is a 100% natural product, and consumers are increasingly demanding better, higher quality cocoa in their hot drinks. As a well known provider of hot beverages in the South-East, I feel strongly that products such as these will become the norm, rather than the exception, in the market. The UK is going to move towards quality hot chocolate, which bears no comparison to the sweet, milky drinks that the British public is usually offered.

The sweet spot, as every self-respecting chocaholic knows, is almost like a sensory crossroad, where all the elements combine to make a heady mix. Nothing beats the smell of a freshly harvested cacao pod – it really does smell of chocolate.

The quality of the cocoa bean will directly affect the final product. The cocoa content is the key element to consider when choosing a brand, in the same way as an expensive chocolate will advertise its cocoa content as a measure of quality. As with so many things in life, the quality of the raw ingredient is of paramount importance, and it was abundantly clear that a great deal of thought had gone in to how the estate was planned. There were paths cut into the mountain to allow visitors to see at first hand how the estate is managed, with signs that described the

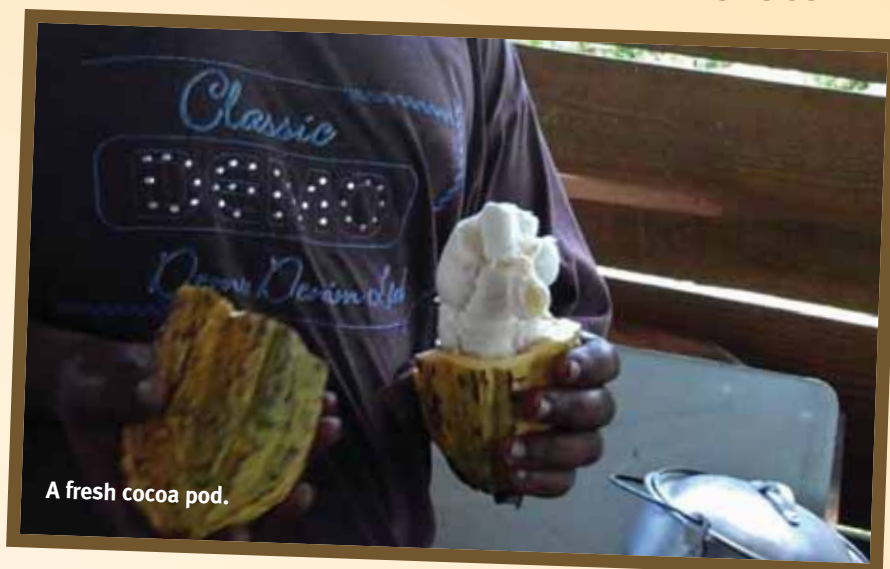
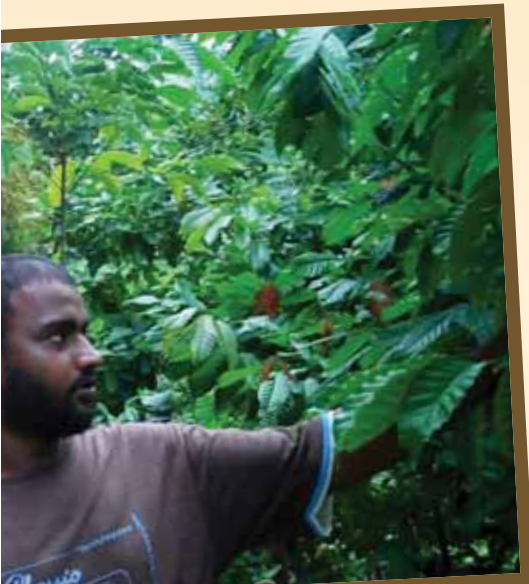


different plants – chilis, plantain, banana, coffee and even the biological names of the different cacao trees.

## Insight

The visit to the estate gave me an insight into the growing conditions necessary for producing quality chocolate - lush rainforest within 20 degrees latitude of the equator, and, in the case of the Tobago Cocoa estate, some of the most spectacular scenery known to man. I feel that it is my responsibility and duty to ensure that I am fully aware of how Edgcumbes' products reach our shelves.

Traditionally the trees are grown under shade trees to resemble their natural habitat. In the case of the Tobago Cocoa Estate, this was provided by banana trees grown expressly for this purpose, all adding to the beauty of the place. Indeed the estate has embraced Eco-Tourism with gusto, and regularly holds tours and rum and chocolate tastings for the many visitors who travel to Tobago to visit this artisan cocoa producer. There is even a specially-made wood burning oven in which they cook meals to be taken at sundown, all washed down with the local rum.



A fresh cocoa pod.



The drying shelves.

and patience to nurture and grow the cacao pods from seed, and this is where the expertise of people like Duane and Harry is brought to bear.

The Estate doesn't actually make chocolate. They ship the dried cocoa beans to the best French Chocolatiers in Europe and leave them to their 'dark arts'!

**Taste for chocolate**

By comparison to tea, the health benefits of the cocoa bean are not that well documented, but there is a growing understanding of the part that antioxidants play in our overall wellbeing. High cocoa content dark chocolate in particular ticks all the boxes – it doesn't get much better.

In the UK, we have always loved the taste of chocolate but quality is now recognised as a key component of the drink. I believe that shortly there will be specialist chocolate houses in the same way that the large coffee chains have taken off.

As most people know, the higher the cocoa content, the better the quality. This enables the chocolate to have less sugar, which is often used as a bulking agent, and can mask the flavour of indifferent or low cocoa content products.

What I came away with was a strong vision as to how Edgcumbes can help our clients move towards fulfilling the changing tastes of consumers. We can offer a wide range chocolate products to enhance any menu, from syrups to the heavenly thick hot chocolate adored by the Spanish. After all, they brought it back from the New World in the fourteenth century.

*If you would like to learn more about chocolate and how to use it, Edgcumbes can be contacted on (01243) 555775 (www.edgcumbes.co.uk).*

The process of fermentation and drying are key factors in determining the success of the crop for commercial purposes, and I was treated to a personal tour of this facility. We met estate manager, Harry (who clearly knew his beans from his pods), and who explained in detail the process which starts with the pod being split open to allow removal of the beans and pulp. Interestingly, the pulp tastes delicious, rather like the flesh of a lychee, although Harry looked rather shocked as I passed the pod round and tore off chunks of it to try!

Harry lives and works on the estate and the strong impression gained was that he was extremely proud of the achievements that have been made in the past few years. It is always a heartening sight to witness real passion and knowledge in an industry. Harry had been recruited by Duane from the larger island of Trinidad, and he seemed very happy to be living in the idyllic surroundings on the estate. Duane spends a lot of time marketing and promoting his estate in Europe where the love of fine chocolate has always been evident. A visit to his

web site ([www.tobagococoa.com](http://www.tobagococoa.com)) is well worth it.

**Careful production**

Producing cocoa is simpler than processing raw coffee beans, but as always the integrity of the product is directly related to the care taken by the farmer. It was clear that Harry and his team are experts in their field and really care about their work. "Once we have produced the dried beans, our job is finished," Harry told me. "My aim is to produce a premium product that we are proud to call Tobagan Cocoa beans."

We saw the fermentation tanks that are filled with the pods and left for a few days, after which the pulp has literally melted away. The beans are then left to dry on flat, covered shelves for another few days. They become dark, and when bitten into, taste strongly of chocolate. This may seem obvious but when one considers the processes necessary to bring tea and coffee to a drinkable state, it is amazing how quickly the raw material becomes a marketable product. Nevertheless, it takes a great deal of time