



THE SWEET BOUTIQUE

Bringing together all the fruits of fertile lands and the talents of start-up culture has helped one French-owned company put Vietnam on the map for single-origin, artisanal chocolate, as Connla Stokes writes

Down at the chocolate factory, we've reached a critical moment. As the smooth, finished chocolate is tempered, the heat is lowered gradually. According to Vincent Mourou, this will ensure that when the liquid chocolate is pumped out, it will be at the very cusp of crystallisation. "It's not just a chocolate fountain," the co-owner of local start-up, Marou Faiseurs de Chocolat, adds gravely. The chocolate is then poured, rather too tantalisingly for this observer, into trays featuring Marou's signature mould. Each features slanted, slightly asymmetrical lines. Already, as the molten goodness hits the open air, the scent is beyond divine.

The history of cocoa in Vietnam was not always this sweet. The French colonial administration, under the advice of Dr Alexandre Yersin, first tried to encourage the crop in late 19th-century Cochinchina, by offering subsidies to farmers. But by 1907, they were ready to pull the plug. "It seems, effectively, useless to encourage this," complained a Lieutenant General in a missive of the time. The cocoa trees that remained were just another fleck of colour amongst the tropical tapestry of the fertile Mekong Delta in southern Vietnam. It is said that eventually, locals simply ate the fruit fresh. Fast forward to the late 1990s, when international trading companies plus Western development aid agencies dovetailed effectively to resurrect cocoa as a cash crop. The industry has since gained momentum, partly thanks to shrinking production in traditional markets such as West Africa.

PHOTO: NICE CREATIVE



At the end of 2013, there were an estimated 42,500 farmers growing cocoa in Vietnam, on 22,500 hectares (up from 900 hectares in 1999). Chocolate lovers rejoiced. The ballast of Vietnam’s agrarian economy is formed by mass-produced commodities, such as coffee, tea, cotton and rice, cultivated on large plantations. But Vietnam’s cocoa farms tend to be small, intercropped plantations, where cocoa trees, mostly the trinitario species, can grow alongside cashew and coconut, and other fruits. This multicultural approach suits Vietnamese farmers, who don’t want to be overly reliant on one crop – and it also suits the cocoa trees, as they require shade from the scorching sun. Still, there is always a fear for stakeholders in these cocoa-related enterprises, that a fall in global prices might result in slashed trees.

“That’s why we pay above market prices for quality beans,” says Mourou, who claims his co-owned, Vietnam-based start-up currently produces the country’s only single-origin, bean-to-bar artisanal chocolate. “When market prices go down, Marou pays up,” he notes. Marou’s chocolate makers frequently head out to the cocoa farms, each within half a day’s driving distance from Ho Chi Minh City, where Marou’s factory is located. “It helps to have your nose in the bag,” he smiles.

Formerly an advertising executive based in San Francisco, USA, Mourou happily admits that before 2011, he didn’t even know that Vietnam had cocoa. His curiosity was piqued when a friend, an agronomist working for a major chocolate producer, mentioned the craftsmanship of Vietnamese cocoa farmers. On a whim, he persuaded friend and fellow Frenchman Samuel Maruta to ride into the countryside to view the farms up close. They travelled by motorbike to a province in the south-east of Vietnam, and fortunately met Mr Duc on a small organic plantation. Mourou and Maruta were impressed by Duc’s sophisticated drop-by-drop irrigation system, and purchased a two-kilogram sack of beans – returning home to try their hand at chocolate making.

After an evening of roasting, winnowing and grinding, they produced a block of chocolate with a coarse taste and a granular texture that was raw, and fruity. It wasn’t sophisticated chocolate yet (“it was like a punch in the

OPPOSITE: *Many may view Vietnam as full of rice fields, and perhaps it is – but look out, there is a new crop on the block*
BELOW: *In 2011, Vincent Mourou (left) and Samuel Maruta (centre), co-owners of Marou, discovered the joys of chocolate making. Their quality product also depends on sourcing the best cacao pods (bottom)*

face,” remembers Mourou), but it inspired the pair to pursue a chocolate-themed start-up venture.

The Marou philosophy is steeped in the French tradition of chocolate making, which sees unadulterated chocolate being created from nothing but cocoa and sugar. The emphasis has always been quality, not quantity, and the approach entirely artisanal. The duo’s first humble purchase was an Indian lentil grinder, purchased in Singapore for a few hundred dollars, while training initially came courtesy of the internet, and at a later stage, from Hans Wiberg-Wagner, another helpful agronomist friend, who ran training sessions for cocoa farmers in southern Vietnam. The sessions provided a master class in cocoa cultivation for the two apprentices.

“It gave us a good feel for cocoa, and for what was happening at farms,” says Mourou. The farmers don’t simply pluck cacao pods and fill container trucks bound for industrial zones. The post-harvest process is a tedious business – 12 kilograms of pods makes just a single kilogram of dried beans



PHOTOS: MEL MASSEY (MAIN, TOP RIGHT)



At Marou, every step of the process that takes cacao pods (above) to the perfect sweet treat to end a meal (opposite) is filled with love





LEFT: Marou's chocolate bars boast a characteristic pattern, thanks to the moulds used to make their products
BELOW: Cocoa beans must be dried before they can be turned into chocolate – a process almost akin to alchemy



BANYAN TREE LĂNG CÔ, CENTRAL VIETNAM
An elegant mix of heritage and modernity, Banyan Tree Lăng Cô is part of a 280-hectare resort of natural beauty. Venture out into the picturesque countryside, or slow down the pace at the hotel's championship golf course. Enjoy a vista of rice fields and streams woven seamlessly into the course.



VIETNAM, WHERE EAST MEETS WEST	
Highest mountain Fan Si Pan, at almost 3,150 metres high	Education The country has around 94 percent literacy
Land From north to south Vietnam measures about 1,650 kilometres	Transport There are an estimated 10 million bikes on Vietnam's roads

– and a delicate affair, too. The art of fermentation in particular is an intuitive business, where experience trumps guidelines. Each brings added value to the farmer, who can trade directly with a chocolate company like Marou Faiseurs de Chocolat. Indeed, both Mourou and Maruta take pride in the fact that they are on first-name basis with everyone on the farms.

In early 2011, the two Frenchmen drove a patched-up 1965 Citroën La Dalat (“The mother of all lemons,” notes Mourou) to source beans from farms in neighbouring provinces. The unique qualities of each province’s beans would become an integral part of the Marou brand’s identity. They decided against mixing beans from the five different provinces and instead elected to make five separate products, each branded by its source. This provincial bean-to-bar distinctiveness emphasises Marou’s belief in the evident flavours of each territory within its chocolate.

An early fan of Marou chocolate, Hanoi-based chef Donald Berger, says the chocolate’s subtle flavours are both amazing and easily detectable. “It is comparable to the tremendous difference of terroir in the best wine regions of, say, Bordeaux and

CHOCOLATE FARMS
Chocolate was thought to have been introduced into Vietnam by the French in the late 19th century. As demand rises globally, experts are warning there could be a shortfall of one million tonnes by 2020.

Burgundy.” The hope is that no industrially produced dark chocolate can compete with this unbridled individualism. Indeed, Maruta argues that it is not just the land that influences the taste of his chocolate, but also the air during the fermentation process. “Maybe it’s a little bit mysterious, but it’s something that everyone can recognise,” he says. Berger is less restrained. “The taste of each Marou bar lingers on the palate like a great fine wine,” he enthuses.

Each of Marou’s bars are hand-wrapped with an award-winning design, crafted by another Ho Chi Minh City-based start-up, Rice Creative. Inspired by the ceremonial wrappers produced by artisanal printers in Vietnam’s Cho Lon district, Rice Creative hand-drew chocolate-oriented motifs, of cacao pods, fruits and leaves, and added monsoonal clouds across an intricate lattice-patterned background. The typography referenced vintage signage found around Vietnam, while Marou’s now-standard colours, deep vermilion, ochre yellow, grass green, midnight blue, and peacock aqua blue, came courtesy of the trinitario cacao pods’ natural hues. The gold-embossed lettering and internal gold wrapper completed the decadent experience Marou hoped to deliver with each bar.

While Rice Creative worked on the designs, a friend attending a dinner in London, produced a prototype of the bar for his dining companions – one of them Melina Keyes from *Wallpaper** magazine. As fate would have it, Keyes was helping prepare a special issue on handmade creations around the globe. This mysterious bar of single-origin chocolate, featuring beautiful handwritten calligraphy, fitted the bill – and besides the feature, the selected products were exhibited at Milan’s



LIVING DOWN BY THE WATER
Lang Co fishing village lies off the pristine white sands of Chan May beach. From March to September a pop-up carnival of about 30 tents appears, strung with lights, all cooking the locally caught fish, landed that day. Before sunrise, while most people are still sleeping, the village comes to life. The boats return in the early morning, selling their haul at the beach. Watching lifelong fisherman land their catch is an intriguing insight for visitors into the daily life of the area.



PHOTOS: MEL MASSEY (MAIN, RIGHT); ARNON JOEL SANTOS (FISHERMAN)

Design Week, in early April 2012. Marou concocted a bar with 80 percent cocoa content, made with beans from the best organic farms in Tien Giang province. To enhance the subtle flavours (light citrusy fruit, banana, cinnamon, honey, a hint of tobacco), they decided to make a thinner bar. In the submission, Rice Creative went far beyond the brief, adding the *Wallpaper** name and creating funky, retro-futuristic designs that quickly went viral online. “If the chocolate is as beautiful as the wrapper, I’ll buy some,” wrote one German distributor in an email. France’s biggest newspaper, *Ouest France*, ran with the story before the chocolate became available there. By June 2012, exporting was underway: “We hardly called anyone,” Mourou says.

Today, the brand’s products are stocked by 50 retail outlets in France, making it the company’s primary market, followed by Sweden and the United Kingdom. Other significant markets include Japan, Qatar, the United States, Canada and the Philippines. In recent times, single-origin bean to bar chocolate has become fashionable, helping Marou ride a trend. To cap off a dizzying 2013, at the Academy of Chocolate Awards last year, Marou scooped up three prizes, two for chocolate, one for design. A few Vietnam competitors are warming up on the sidelines – with Belgian-based Puratos Group announcing in late 2013 that it was in the final stages of developing a single-origin Vietnam chocolate product too, but Marou’s co-owners seem unfazed. The factory and office, staffed by a team of 20, including Mourou and Maruta, is a hive of activity and operates at full capacity, churning out 100 kilograms a day.

On the factory floor, where a melange of cocoa-heavy aromas fill the air, there is now an 80-year-old coffee roaster, shipped from France, roasting cocoa without complaint, and an enormous rubber press that went through “a bit of a rough patch in a junkyard” but now happily pumps out cocoa butter. Everyone and everything at Marou seem to have had a previous life, including Jason Laurent, a 27-year-old former pastry chef from Kansas, in the United States, who describes his role as chocolate chef as “watching, tasting, tasting – and more tasting”.

The chocolate makers reflect that, while there are rough times for

BELOW: *Some people describe chocolate as a taste explosion, and a lot of that experience is really thanks to the aroma, in addition to the flavour*
BOTTOM: *Every step to produce an artisanal chocolate bar must be done just right*



PHEVA BOUTIQUE CHOCOLATES
Guests at Banyan Tree Lăng Cô enjoy a sweet surprise in the shape of an elegant envelope of chocolates from local chocolatier Pheva. Regional ingredients are used to create these treats with unusual flavours such as pistachio and black pepper.

roasting and grinding, the process is ultimately an intuitive one. Beans are crunched and winnowed before being ground with cocoa butter for 24 hours – then mixed with sugar for another 24 hours in a room permanently hovering around 40 degrees Celsius. All the better for the chocolate to ooze.

While Marou has envisaged using artisanal sugar from the Mekong, it proved to be too punchy. “It overpowered the cocoa,” explains Maruta. Unrefined sugar brings moisture, he warns, adding gravely, “Chocolate abhors water.” Back on the floor, the tempering complete, a 30-minute blast of cool, refrigerated air then sees the bars wrapped, stacked and ready to transport. From the farm through to the airport hangar, the sweet boutique is in business again. ☸



PHOTO: NEIL MASSEY (VINCENT MOUROU)



SOOTHING SPRINGS

SIMON KONG, EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT MANAGER AT ANGSA NA TENGCHONG • HOT SPRING VILLAGE DISCUSSES THE HOTTEST NEW THING

One of Banyan Tree’s newest handmade creations, the soothing springs concept brings the romance of natural springs to a premium resort.

Cradled in a landscape of rugged volcanoes, Tengchong is brimming with hot, mineral-rich waters. With its own natural well, guests at Angsana Tengchong • Hot Spring Village can enjoy the wonders of nature from this elegant retreat. At Angsana’s first hot spring resort, villas have their own private hot tubs, while couples will enjoy the romance pools and nature lovers can revel in the refreshing forest springs.

Visiting China’s hot spring resorts has been a custom for years. Age-old traditions now combine with modern comforts, and unlike some hot spring resorts, the mineral waters here are both clear and devoid of any sulphurous smell.

Fans of this naturally beautiful spa destination will also enjoy the scenic ambience of Banyan Tree Chongqing Beibei for another contemporary take on hot spring relaxation.



Angsana Tengchong • Hot Spring Village