

Patricia Tsai, founder of ChocoVivo, a small boutique chocolate factory and retail store located in Culver City, was our featured speaker for February. She spoke to us about her journey from working as a CPA to becoming an entrepreneur in the food industry who specializes in processing her own chocolate using methods that began in Mesoamerica 2,000 years ago. She stressed, repeatedly, it is her mission to educate people that real chocolate is a food, not a confection, providing historical anecdotes as well as edible samples.

Patricia's path to chocolate-making began on a trip to Mexico, where she first became aware of the history of the cacao



bean and its processing. She shared with us how both the Mayans and Aztecs would make a chocolate drink from the raw beans, because in its natural state it has no sugar in it and is a very pure energy source. It is said that Montezuma drank it for virility, and soldiers would drink it before going into battle. These early civilizations would also use the beans as currency in trade, and it was the Spanish conquistadors who first introduced the beans to Europe as a luxury import, where it was sweetened with sugar. Patricia's interests led her back to Tabasco, Mexico, where she began studying with Vicente Gutierrez from Cacep Chocolates. He is a multi-generational cacao grower, who became Patricia's mentor and subsequently grower when she began importing beans for her business.

In addition to showing us slides of the plantation and the fascinating way in which the cacao pods grow on the trees, Patricia also brought a couple of pods to share. She cracked them open, and we were able to sample the pulp



surrounding the raw beans while she explained the difference between the three types of beans used in chocolate production. Criollo, the most difficult to grow, is the rarest and most expensive, accounting for only 5% of the world's production, while Forastero is the most common, because it has the highest yields and is therefore suitable for mass consumption. Forastero is mainly grown in Africa, where 80% of the world's cocoa production occurs. The third, a natural hybrid of the other two, is Trinitario, which is the main bean used in the production of most fine chocolates, and is what Patricia uses in her factory. The beans are variable and their quality cannot be determined until the pods are opened.

She next explained to us the process of growing, harvesting and fermenting cacao. The *Theobroma cacao* tree grows globally in a zone 20° north and south of the equator. Mature trees begin producing pods after 3-5 years, and they are typically harvested when they turn yellow after the rainy season in January. After harvesting, they are cut open and the seeds are dried at 180° inside a fermentation box, although they can also be sun-dried, which takes longer. The length of fermentation affects their taste - the longer the period, the more acidic the flavor. After the seeds have been fermented, they can be ground into paste from which chocolate products are made.

Patricia chooses to grind her chocolate with a modern tool similar to the traditional "mano and metate" which resemble a mortar and pestle. She uses two lava grinding stones - one spinning and one stationary - which create a wet paste from the beans that is spread onto sheet

pans, frozen for 20 minutes and then cut into bars. Additionally, she incorporates other ingredients during the grinding process to produce flavored chocolate bars, some of which she had available for us to taste. The percentage of cacao is clearly marked on her packaging, and she now even offers a 100% bar because her customers have requested it. Patricia also passed around samples of her roasted cacao beans, which have had the shell winnowed off but remain textural and crunchy.

While we tasted various bar samples such as "Shangri-La" and "Mayan Traditions" that are available both at her shop and on-line at chocovivo.com, Patricia told us that she also offers chocolate drinks at her factory which can be customized with multiple flavors. The base drinks are made with either pure, undiluted brown rice or hazelnut milk, or just plain water. Water combined with 100% cacao is the strongest combination and is a high energy drink favored by some of her athletic clientele.

Patricia concluded her presentation with a short question and answer session and by reiterating her mantra of: "Chocolate is food. Know where your chocolate is coming from. Understand how it is processed and its ingredients". Words to consider, as the audience was invited to purchase bars and beans for themselves or their loved ones - just in time for Valentine's Day.



✎ Sabine Steinmetz

SHARING SECRETS RESPONSES:

What "Bucket List" garden do you hope to visit someday?

I would love to see Sissinghurst, both for its gardens as well as for its relationship with English literature. Also, I'd love to have a private tour of Giverny (sans crowds). There are more gardens, all over the world, but these two came to mind, first!

- Joan McGuire

Charles Jencks' "Garden of Cosmic Speculation" in Scotland. It's only open to the public one day a year so you can't just spontaneously drop by when you're in the neighborhood...

- Anonymous

Living in Southern California, we are spoiled with the wealth of natural and man-made gardens that surround us, and sometimes forget about some of the hidden gems to be found "in our own backyard". Here are a few:

- Hortense Miller Garden in Laguna Beach
- Tillman Japanese Garden in Van Nuys
- Wattles Park (and Mansion) in Hollywood
- Murphy Sculpture Garden at UCLA

And don't forget the Garden Conservancy's Open Days - get out and explore this year!