

5 Canadian Chocolate Makers at the Forefront of the Bean-to-Bar Movement

Chocolate is one of those rare things that is more than the sum of its parts. It is decadent and sensual, hanging just at the knife edge of impropriety; it is a safe and comforting gatekeeper to a rose-tinted wash of childhood memories. It is an exchange between friends, lovers, and family members, a sacred covenant to share one special moment together in the whirlwind of day-to-day life.

Chocolate is a cultural phenomenon.

But have you ever stopped to consider the journey that chocolate makes before it arrives to meet us? Its inception deep in the forests of Ecuador or Uganda; the careful sorting, roasting, and winnowing of the cocoa beans; the magical alchemy of grinding and conching those beans into the rich, heady substance consumed and adored worldwide.

More and more chocolate makers are seeking to understand this process. The bean-to-bar movement is helping consumers, including pastry chefs and restaurateurs, appreciate chocolate in a whole new way. Now this movement is taking root in Canada.

What Is Bean-to-Bar Chocolate?

To understand why this trend is so important, we first need to look at what bean-to-bar chocolate actually is. A bean-to-bar chocolate maker is someone who creates bulk chocolate from raw, unprocessed cacao (or cocoa) beans. Many of them will develop partnerships with trusted cacao farmers, offering them better prices for their harvest than larger corporations and helping to draw attention to the work they do.

Once the raw material is sourced, chocolate makers will roast them in a process similar to roasting coffee beans before breaking them down and removing the husk-like shell in a process called winnowing. Then they'll be broken down even further and ground into a paste mixed with sugar and, for milk chocolate, milk powder.

Finally, this chocolate-like material goes through the final conching stage — a slow process of heat and motion that ages and develops the flavours inherent in the bean. This can last anywhere from a few hours to a few days.

Through this process bean-to-bar chocolate makers use every single step as an opportunity to bring out the best possible flavour from each individual harvest. They learn to understand the distinctive differences between cacao from Madagascar and cacao from Venezuela, and why the work done by cacao farmers is so much more important and complex than simply supplying a base commodity.

Okay, but How Is That Different From Being a Chocolatier?

Chocolatiers are artists that use chocolate as their medium. They use it to create anything from decadent truffles to show stopping gallery pieces. A chocolate maker is the one who makes the raw material. Think of it a bit like a craftsman who makes musical instruments and a musician, or a miller and a baker.

Most of the time these two roles are completely separate players, though some chocolatiers will also turn to chocolate making in order to learn more about their art and create chocolate desserts with more specific flavour profiles. These are sometimes called “bean-to-bonbon”.

Let’s look at some of the brilliant people championing this craft in Canada.

5 Canadian Bean-to-Bar Chocolate Makers

Soma

One of the earliest makers on the Canadian chocolate scene, Toronto-based [Soma Chocolatemaker](#) began in 2003, in a tiny space in a former whiskey distillery. They create fine quality single origin chocolate bars (with gorgeous watercolour packaging!) as well as their groundbreaking fruit couvertures — a chocolate-like product made by blending cocoa butter with fruit powders in place of the cocoa beans.

Sirene

Taylor Kennedy of [Sirene Chocolates](#) in Victoria BC had a successful career with National Geographic before turning to chocolate making. It shows in his attention to the sustainability and fair treatment of cacao farmers, the ecological history of the cacao varieties he works with, and his wildlife-inspired packaging. Several of Sirene's bars have won prestigious awards from bodies like the [Academy of Chocolate](#) and the [International Chocolate Awards](#).

Hummingbird

The priority at [Hummingbird Chocolate](#) in Almonte ON is transparent, respectful relationships with the farms where they source their cacao beans. They are committed to making sure their farmers get paid higher than Fair Trade prices and that all farms commit to using ethical practices. Their bars have won numerous awards, each one a carefully crafted portrait of the best its beans can be.

East Van Roasters

Vancouver-based cacao and coffee roastery [East Van Roasters](#) is another enterprise that champions sustainability and social change, but they focus their efforts closer to home. They provide training and work experience to women recovering from addiction and hard living on Vancouver's east side. They make single-origin bars as well as fruit and spice bars and chocolate bonbons.

Qantu

French-Canadian [Qantu Cacao et Chocolat](#) is based in Montreal, QC. Husband and wife team Maxime and Elfi met while travelling in Peru, a country known for its quality cocoa beans. In 2016 they hit the chocolate scene running, impressing chocolate industry professionals with their bold, well developed flavours. Since then they've consistently won numerous awards for almost all their single-origin bars.

The Future of Bean-to-Bar Chocolate

At the turn of the twenty-first century in the United States there were only five small batch bean-to-bar chocolate makers. Now there are more than [two hundred](#). They're run by men, women, families, ambitious young millennials and people who have already had long,

successful careers in other industries. Now other countries such as Canada and the UK are beginning to join the chocolate revolution.

We're seeing chocolatiers and pastry chefs beginning to move away from bulk couverture produced in Belgium or Switzerland and turning towards independent, locally crafted chocolate. We're seeing more and more consumers demanding sustainability and humane practices at the origin points of the food they eat. Following in the footsteps of coffee and fine wine, craft chocolate is a complex, beautiful, multi-faceted vehicle for social change that is taking the world by storm.