

## **Why You Should Support Craft Chocolate**

You may have heard the word “craft” being used alongside other indulgent luxury foods like coffee, wine, beer, and even cheese. The world is experiencing an exciting shift in consciousness towards high quality, ethical, multifaceted food that’s produced with a blend of passion and unmatched expertise. Today’s generations are learning to support makers with transparent supply chains, who care about the farmers and producers they represent and work together with them to create products that will change the world.

We saw it happen with craft beer in the late 1970s, and then with craft coffee at the end of the 20th century. Now craft chocolate is taking the world by storm.

### **What Is Craft Chocolate?**

The “craft” part comes from “craftsman”, or “craftsmanship”, and refers to the way makers of fine chocolate treat their product as a sacred art form. A craft chocolate maker is intimately aware of every step of the chocolate making process: taking care of the precious *Theobroma Cacao*, or cacao tree, that produces gorgeous pods full of cocoa beans; harvesting, drying, and fermenting the beans off of the tree; sorting through the beans for the very best ones and carefully roasting them at just the right temperature curve; separating them from the husks around the beans and grinding them down with other ingredients like sugars, milk, milk alternatives, or spices like pure vanilla; then, finally, tempering the liquid chocolate and moulding it into rich, glossy chocolate bars.

It’s rare that a craft chocolate brand will do every single one of these steps independently; most will work in partnership with farmers and other producers who are experts in their field, ensuring that they are paid fairly no matter where they are in the world. Not only does this ensure quality employment opportunities in struggling countries *and* highlight some of the amazing talent there that often goes overlooked, but it quite simply creates a superior product. These loyal, mutually beneficial relationships create a quality standard that is out of reach for larger corporations.

## **Is That the Same As Bean-to-Bar Chocolate?**

Often, but not always. Craft chocolate, as we saw above, refers to an intimate relationship between the maker and every step of the chocolate making process, from growing cacao in the equatorial regions of the world all the way to the final packaging. A bean-to-bar chocolate maker will source raw cocoa beans, roast them, grind them, and put them through a delicate conching process that brings out the very best that batch of cocoa beans has to offer.

Many craft chocolate companies will make their own chocolate right from the cocoa bean, learning more about the fascinating properties of the world's most coveted ingredient as they go. Others will work with professional chocolate makers to create a product based on their specifications, values, and ideal flavour profile.

Then there are chocolate companies, like Nobó, who embrace a hybrid model; we work side by side with a team of bean-to-bar chocolate makers to create our signature vegan milk chocolate blend, as well as making limited edition small batch chocolate blends in house.

## **How Long Has Craft Chocolate Been Around?**

Since words like “craft”, “artisan”, and “sustainable” have no legal standardization, it's hard to pinpoint at exactly what moment the craft chocolate movement began. However, it's believed that the first seed was planted as early as 1996, by two American gentlemen named John Scharffenberger and Robert Steinberg. Scharffenberger came from a winemaking background and was perhaps the first to apply those mindful tasting skills to chocolate.

They did this pretty successfully for a while, and in 2005 the Hershey company bought Scharffenberger Chocolate for the cool meal ticket of \$50,000.

Some weird stuff started happening around this time. The first was that more and more chocolate makers began springing up across the United States, inspired by Scharffenberger's successful business model and by the shift in consumers towards a more enriching, higher quality product. Since industrial chocolate making equipment was expensive and often the size of a small barn, new chocolate makers began DIY-ing their own upcycled machines out of things like clothes dryers and vacuum cleaners. Most importantly, people were beginning to take an interest in where their food was coming from and the impact it was having on the world.

The second — the “proprietary secret recipe”, the lifeblood of major brands like Nestle and Coca Cola? Yeah, that was kind of... *over*. A new generation of producers was reaching towards this glimmering new trend of sharing industry information. Instead of cutthroat corporate politics and piracy, small batch craft chocolate makers were actually *learning together*.

Today, there are thousands of craft chocolate makers both large and small spread across the world, including some amazingly talented producers right here in Ireland. Nobó is proud to be a part of this inspiring new journey.

## **How Is Craft Chocolate Making a Difference?**

Craft chocolate represents an exciting wave of artisans, technicians, and passionate people trying to share this brave new art form with the world. When you eat independently made craft chocolate, you’re supporting a powerful industry with the ability to create real positive change in the world. Here are a few ways the craft chocolate industry is doing some good.

### **Better Prices For Farmers**

Unlike large scale regulating bodies like Fair Trade (we’ll talk more about Fair Trade a little later here on the blog), craft chocolate is based on direct, meaningful relationships with the people on the agricultural side of the industry.

This means that instead of treating cacao as a uniform commodity and paying farmers bulk prices that should, quite frankly, be an embarrassment, people in the craft chocolate industry are having open conversations about how to improve the quality of the cacao being grown and making sure the growers are being fairly compensated for their work.

Until very recently, many cacao farmers in places like Columbia and Ecuador had never even tasted a finished chocolate bar. Now they’re becoming an active and valued voice in the production process and are being supported with wages much higher than certifications like Fair Trade and Rainforest Alliance are able (or willing) to offer.

## **Better For the Ecosystem**

The craft chocolate industry is a fantastic movement in terms of supporting people living in cacao-producing countries, but what about the land itself? Mass market chocolate is often made from hardy, low quality cacao tree varieties that are grown in great swaths across huge stretches of farmland, wiping out much of the land's biodiversity and natural ecosystem (this type of farming is called "monoculture"). Native heirloom varieties of cacao — which often produce better chocolate but are more difficult to grow and maintain — are struggling.

Craft chocolate makers, cacao farmers, and fine cacao initiatives are working together to preserve biodiverse agroforestry systems — semi-wild farmland where cacao trees are grown interspersed with other crops and plants. While harvesting from these landscapes is slower and more labour intensive, it's much better for the environment and helps to support insects and other wildlife that make their home there.

When you choose independent craft chocolate over sugary mass market brands, you're giving back to the earth that produced it in a very real way.

## **Better Chocolate**

What this all comes down to at the end is that by supporting these positive social and environmental systems, craft chocolate makers really can create a far superior product.

Building transparent and communicative relationships with farmers means that the harvest and post-harvest processes are done with much more care and attention to detail than they would be when selling to major corporations. Helping to restore ancient cacao forests and giving them the conditions to grow as rich and healthy as possible means that when the beans eventually come down to the chocolate maker, they will be bursting with multifaceted flavour and nutrients that you could never find in monocultured, commodity-grade bars.

Finally, craft chocolate makers don't fill their chocolate with a lot of sticky sweet, overprocessed additives in order to make it palatable. When you're working with the finest ingredients and the knowledge on how to coax out the very best from them, simplicity is essential in making your chocolate as good as it can be. Even when chocolate makers add flavouring inclusions to their chocolate such as fruit, nuts, or essential oils, it is done with a respect to the cacao and to the art form as a whole, ensuring that all ingredients lift each other up rather than drowning each other out.

So next time you find yourself craving an indulgent, chocolatey break, consider reaching for an independent business that supports fine quality craft chocolate. It's better for you and better for the world.