“What is FINE CHOCOLATE?”

FCIA attempts to answer this question by looking at the ingredients that we, as fine chocolate professionals, think should be included in a product in order to call it fine chocolate. These are voluntary ingredient standards that we have developed to help both industry professionals and chocolate lovers differentiate fine chocolate products.

FINE INGREDIENTS

First let's look at the ingredients that may be present in fine pure chocolate. We feel fine chocolate and chocolate products should only contain the ingredients on the following lists, though they may not contain all of them.

CHOCOLATE:

- **Dark Chocolate Ingredients:** Cacao liquor, sugar, cacao butter, lecithin, and vanilla.
- **Milk Chocolate Ingredients:** Cacao liquor, sugar, cacao butter, milk solids, milk fat, lecithin, vanilla.
- **White Chocolate Ingredients:** Sugar, Cacao butter, milk solids, milk fat, lecithin, vanilla.
- **Other names for the above ingredients you might find on a label:**
    - cocoa liquor, chocolate liquor, unsweetened chocolate, cacao mass, cocoa mass, chocolate fondant, cocoa beans, cacao beans, chocolate beans, cacao seeds, cocoa seeds, chocolate seeds.
    - cacao butter, cocoa butter, cacao oil, cocoa oil, cocoa fat, cacao fat.
    - Milk, cream, whole milk, condensed milk, milk crumb, dry milk powder, dry cream powder, milk solids, dry milk solids, milk fat, butter oil, butter fat.
    - Soy Lecithin, Lecithin, soya lecithin.
    - Vanilla, Real Vanilla, Vanilla Beans, Whole Vanilla Beans

Note: In our opinion there can be no substitutions for these ingredients (one fat for another, vanillin in replacement of vanilla, etc.)

CHOCOLATE CONFECTIONS:

Ingredients: cacao liquor, milk solids, cacao butter, butter, vanilla, natural flavorings, cacao beans, cacao seeds, cocoa powder, nuts, and soy lecithin/glucose natural flavors include: real vanilla, vanilla beans, fresh herbs, fresh fruit, fruit purees, liquor

DIFFERENTIATING FINE CHOCOLATE

The definition of "fine chocolate" can be as elusive as the definition of fine coffee, fine wine or even fine art. What differentiates fine chocolate from other chocolates? We look at the processing and manufacturing processes that create outstanding products.

At the heart of many creations that are considered "fine" is a purely aesthetic expression. The saying "Art for art's sake," for example, means that art which is not intended to be produced in any quantity or widely sold but is to be shared by anyone who loves art. Of course, it doesn't make sense not to make and sell chocolate because consuming chocolate is really a key purpose of making chocolate in the first place!

Another problem in defining "fine" is the fact that personal subjectivity plays a major role. You may enjoy a rich roast coffee without any cream or sweetener while your best friend prefers a mild roast with sugar and frothed milk. The coffee used in both your drink and that of your friend's may be from the same bean but handled very differently in order to deliver two very distinct beverages. A high quality coffee bean and roasting processes help ensure that both you and your friend have a very pleasant coffee beverage experience.

Fine chocolate may be defined by both a selection of high quality ingredients and by the unique artistry that a Chocolatier uses to create chocolates, truffles and other chocolate confections. In general, there are five areas that combine to define a fine chocolate product:

- cacao origin and processing
- chocolate production practices
- non-chocolate ingredient quality
- chocolatier's technical expertise
- artistry and presentation

CACAO ORIGIN AND PROCESSING

Ask most people what's in their chocolate bar and they will probably answer chocolate, milk and sugar. While this answer is true, it is an incomplete picture of the chocolate inside the wrapper.

Perhaps you have recently heard more about cacao percentages. Even mainstream chocolate bar producers have gotten on the bandwagon to promote their "Cacao reserve" or seventy percent dark chocolate. But what do all these terms really mean? Are all 70% cacao bars equal? What should the consumer know and learn to taste to differentiate fine chocolate from the candy bar of our youth?

Like wine, chocolate is an agricultural product whose character and flavor are dependent on genetics, climate, soil and processing practices to yield a finished product. The higher the quality and care taken along the route from bean to bar, the better the finished product will taste. So first let's look at these individual components and explore them a little more, to learn how they affect the taste and quality of chocolate.

Climate- Cacao grows roughly within the latitudes of 20 degrees north or South of the equator. Cacao thrives in countries like Venezuela, Columbia, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Belize, Costa Rica, The Ivory Coast of Africa, Madagascar and even Hawaii. While the crop is naturally a rainforest understory plant, requiring high humidity, fertile soils, rainfall and warm temperatures it has also been grown successfully in drier, poorer conditions under irrigation. Sound Plantation management practices including organic fertilization and pest management effect the quality of beans being produced by the trees. Since soil conditions vary widely throughout the equator the "terroir' or specific geography, soil and climatic conditions of a region can add distinction to the character and flavor of the cacao.

Genetics/Origins- Although the exact location is a debate, Theobroma cacao started in the wild, somewhere in the understoried canopies of the tropical forests of South America and spread throughout Central America and Mexico. Like all plants, certain strains became prized for their ability to produce a good

yield of beans which could be used as currency for trade goods, bear a distinctive flavor or survive in less than ideal conditions. From these regions the name that endured was "Criollo" or "born in the New World. Another strain, Forastero or "foreign" is thought to have originated in the Amazon basin and was later brought to Africa where it was planted heavily due to its ability to yield larger crops of beans and be more disease resistant.. The flavor of Forastero however is considered "flat" or "monotone", even "acidic" and lacks the rich flavor notes of the Criollo bean. A third variety of Cacao, called Trinitario is a hybrid of the two, hardier than Criollo and better tasting than the Forastero., although still not considered as flavorful as a pure Criollo. As cacao trees cross pollinate readily, it becomes very hard to determine exactly what the genetics of a particular orchard without the help of DNA testing. There are a number of claims of "criollo" when in fact the genetics are in doubt. Without that testing chocolate manufacturers have to rely on their own experience and contacts within each cacao growing region to find the best beans.

Processing in the field - Chocolate processing starts at the plantation where skilled personnel select the right time to remove ripe pods from the trees and carefully extract the seeds (or beans) from the pods. When Cacao beans are harvested they must first be properly fermented and dried. The care given to the fermenting process is one of the most important factors in the quality of the chocolate. Different varieties require different fermentation process' to create the complex chemical change that will take place within the bean and allow the true flavor of the chocolate to develop properly. Also, proper drying of the beans ensures the correct fermentation process is not compromised on the beans' long trip to the manufacturer.

Fine chocolate relies upon those plantations that have established a reputation for high quality cultivation, pods selection, and fermentation/drying prior to shipping the beans to chocolate manufacturers. Newer plantations have sprung up that produce smaller cacao production volume, or more rare or mixed cacao product hoping to be supported by the demand for fine flavor chocolate.

CHOCOLATE PRODUCTION PROCESSES

Upon arriving at the bulk chocolate manufacturer, the fermented and dried beans are cleaned and blended – the blending (or not) of bean types is what helps establish the final flavor of the chocolate. The blended beans are then roasted to remove moisture and further establish the final characteristics, including aroma and flavor.

The shells are separated from the roasted bean (nib), which contains about 50% cocoa butter. The nibs are crushed and refined into a paste. That paste is conched along with any additional ingredients such as sugar, vanilla and lecithin. After conching the chocolate is tempered and poured into molds to create blocks of bulk chocolate used by the chocolatier to create chocolate products such as bonbons, pralines and bars.

The total percentage of cacao solids and cocoa butter in the chocolate is referred to in the industry as cocoa liquor. The product can be called a number of different terms on a product label such as chocolate liquor, unsweetened chocolate, cacao mass, cocoa mass, chocolate fondant, cocoa beans, cacao beans, chocolate beans, cacao seeds, cocoa seeds, chocolate seeds.

The higher the cacao content, the lower the sugar content. This is important information for the discerning consumer: cocoa percentage simply refects the sweetness of the product. Although a cacao percentage may be high, that does not indicate that the chocolate is a fine chocolate. Given what we have just learned, the origin of the cacao plant, the conditions under which it was grown and harvested and proper fermentation, drying and production practices go a long way in creating a distinctive flavor profile.

NON-CHOCOLATE INGREDIENT QUALITY

Non-chocolate ingredients are all those elements that a chocolatier uses to complement the core chocolate, for example: butter, heavy cream, nuts, spices, natural flavoring and colorings in bonbons, pralines and bars.

Only pure flavoring ingredients such as sugar, vanilla, and soy lecithin (a stabilizer) are acceptable in dark chocolate bars. If the bar is flavored, it should be done so with natural spices, herbs or fruit extracts. In milk chocolate, milk solids will be added to the

mix. Cocoa butter is the only acceptable fat ingredient - fine chocolates contain no vegetable or animal fats, and no artificial flavoring ingredients.

Fine bonbons/pralines should use only the finest and freshest non-chocolate ingredients and little to no chemical preservatives. When made into bonbons, choose chocolates that use in their ganaches only pure cream, butter, herbs, spices, and glucose. As you become aware of the quality of the ingredients and orgins of your chocolate, so your palette will become more discerning.

CHOCOLATE TECHNICAL EXPERTISE

Chocolatiers arrive at their art from a variety of origins. Some are "born" into a family business and learn the trade from their predecessors. Others arrive from other artistic endeavors such as chef, painter or sculptor. Still others make a step change in their career path as a nurse, attorney, or other non-food profession. Each Chocolatier brings with her all of her past experiences, professional and personal, which in some way color her choices as a Chocolatier. Regardless their starting points, however, Chocolatiers all share a passion for the chocolate arts.

Training is vital to the Chocolatier and encompasses not only the basics of chocolate tempering, recipe development and artistic design, but also of safe food handling, packaging and business acumen. As with any vital area, new concepts are constantly emerging in the chocolate arts, and the Chocolatier must stay abreast of these developments.

The constant companion to training is experience; it is not enough to have only "book knowledge" in the chocolate arts. The Chocolatier must invest hours upon hours of practice, experimentation, trial-and-error, and refinement in order to consistently produce fine chocolate confections.

This combination of passion, training and experience enable the Chocolatier to make the proper technical and artistic decisions that produce fine chocolate. How well has the Chocolatier selected her core chocolates and non-chocolate ingredients? How well has the Chocolatier blended his chocolates and ingredients into a finished product? As you bring the chocolate to your nose do you detect a pleasant aroma? When you close your eyes and savor the first bite does the chocolate meet your expectations of what its

description and presentation *promised*? That moment of exquisite pleasure that chocolate lovers experience begins with the Chocolatier.

ARTISTRY AND PRESENTATION

Fine chocolate products such as bonbons, pralines and bars benefit from their presentation, from the shape and finish of the chocolate, to the packaging that contains the chocolate. Molds may be used with fine hand detail work to present pieces that are like small pieces of sculpture. Hand-crafted chocolates with irregular surfaces and a more rustic look also meet the presentation requirement of fine chocolate, especially if such products elicit childhood memories or reflect back to simpler time and place.