Invisible West Africa: The Politics of Single Origin Chocolate

Origins Erased

Consider a Hershey’s Kiss. At once minimalist and iconic, the twist of silver foil sends a familiar flavor message to the brain, while the wrapper imparts nothing substantial about the chocolate. None of the packaging for the major American candies—say, Mars’s M&Ms or Hershey’s Kit Kat—explains what’s inside, beyond the standard nutritional information. In the early nineteenth century, when artisans were still the predominant confectioners, especially in Europe, chocolate was often advertised with the beans’ places of origin: Caracas, Maracaibo, Bahia—names that, over time, attached some notion of quality. As the twentieth century dawned, however, rising industrial chocolate makers (Hershey, Mars, Cadbury, Nestlé) were more interested in selling the flavors of particular candy bars than bean lineage, and thoroughly effaced any links with the sweaty, tropical farms whence their primary ingredient came. Today, confectionary aisles contain a lot of chocolate, but little information about origins. Most wrappers give no indication that, with few exceptions, the cocoa in those candies came from West Africa.

Given the high volume of cocoa exported from the region, the visibility of West Africa, in both mainstream chocolate candies and the artisanal bars that have proliferated in recent years, is extremely limited. Theobroma cacao is indigenous to the Amazon River Basin, and chocolate’s longest culinary heritage is found in Central and South America. But West Africa has dominated global production for more than a century, and today generates about 70% of the cocoa traded on the world market. For the 2012–2013 season, the International Cocoa Organization forecasts Ivory Coast to produce around 37%, Ghana 21%, and Cameroon and Nigeria just over 5% apiece. Of the top five world producers, only Indonesia (which ranks third) is not a West African country.

As for all the region’s major agricultural exports, cocoa’s shift to West Africa was a colonial story. Spain and Portugal, colonizers of the New World, lost their imperial holds on Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela—major cocoa producers—in the early nineteenth century. At the same time, the Industrial Revolution was gaining momentum in Europe and major advances were occurring in the chocolate industry: what was once a bitter, costly drink transformed, by the late nineteenth century, into a sweet, cheap, mass-marketable bar. Industrial manufacturers needed a steady supply of cocoa, but their New World sources were drying up.

Around this time, Europe’s imperial gaze turned to West Africa—which has an ideal climate for growing cocoa. São Tomé, a Portuguese colony in the Gulf of Guinea, soon became the predominant global supplier. As Britain and France consolidated their imperial holds on West Africa, cocoa swept through the mainland. Ghana (then called the Gold Coast) began exporting cocoa in the late 1880s and by 1911—in just twenty years—had surpassed São Tomé to become the world’s largest exporter, a position it held for most of the twentieth century. West African cocoa was thus the foundation upon which the modern candy industry grew.

A Hershey’s Kiss tells none of this story. Cocoa undergoes a marked transformation between tree and mouth, morphing from bitter crop to manufactured sweet, from pebble-like bean to smooth bar. And yet another transformation occurs in chocolate’s identity, making it doubly difficult to recall cocoa’s provenance: somewhere along the way, the place of manufacture became more important to appreciating chocolate than the place of origin of the beans. “Belgian chocolate” has more purchase than “Ghanaian cocoa,” because chocolate eaters have become accustomed to the particular styles preferred by a handful of national palates: French (dark, heavy roast), Swiss (extra cocoa-butter creamy), Belgian (soft
milk), British (caramel milk), and American (milky, slightly sour Hershey flavor).

Moreover, earlier associations of quality with bean origin were replaced by the notion that quality meant consistency: consumers wanted their favorite candy bar to taste exactly the same every time they ate one, never mind what the cocoa beans might taste like. With this final severing of chocolate from its origins, a vast landscape of agricultural production was (almost permanently) erased from confectionary shelves. Today, West African cocoa, though the basis of the global chocolate industry, remains largely invisible to consumers. The discrepancy between the almost three million tons of cocoa that West African growers produce annually and scarce references to the region as origin site is due to a complex imbrication of trade logistics, bean strain, and representational politics.

Single Origin Chocolate

Though the confectionary giants dissociated chocolate from cocoa in the twentieth century, the twenty-first dawned with new hope for the cocoa bean, in the rise of single origin bars: chocolate made with beans from a single country, region, or plantation. Although consumer preference in the U.S. has been for a milky sweet chocolate, several concurrent food trends paved the way for single origin bars—which are typically dark and have distinct, sometimes unexpected flavors.

Single origin chocolate appeared as interest in food provenance was rising in the U.S., along with increasing demand for organic, local produce. Though cocoa is not local to temperate climates (Theobroma cacao is viable only between twenty degrees north and south of the equator), single origin chocolate at least names the place where the cocoa grew—an appealing “localization” of a food whose origins are generally anonymous. Moreover, the chocolate landscape in the U.S. changed dramatically in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Artisans, never as numerous in the U.S. as in Europe, had all but vanished in the twentieth century, but then began to return. In 1997, there was one bean-to-bar artisan chocolate maker selling commercially in the U.S.—Scharffen Berger; today there are at least thirty-seven, and more appear every year. Unconcerned with producing identical bars with every batch, artisans seek instead to draw out the unique flavors of the beans.

Cocoa beans, like wine grapes, produce distinct flavors depending on strain and terroir, and showcasing that flavor is the goal of single origin chocolate. The number of different strains is remarkable: Mark Christian, founder of the encyclopedic chocolate website, the C-Spot, identifies eight primary and thirty-seven cultivar strains, each with a distinct flavor profile. The celebrated Chuao beans, for example, Christian describes as having notes of “strawberries, blueberries, currants, plums; licorice, molasses, cocoa treacle” while the rare and delicate Porcelana beans taste of “buttery macadamia; berries ’n cream; sometimes breaded flavors & delicate spice.”

Artisans have capitalized on strain differences to produce unique, appealing chocolate bars. Yet West African countries are noticeably absent. Despite being the leading producer region, there are relatively few West Africa single origin bars, and most use Ghana beans. Christian’s Chocolate Census is the most comprehensive online database of chocolate, with almost 1500 entries (as of June 2013), each providing product name, maker, cocoa origin country, manufacturing country, and bean strain, along with a flavor description and rating. Christian describes the entries as “premium bar chocolate.” Thus the database does not include mainstream chocolate candies, and represents the more selectively marketed bars that appeal to connoisseurs.

Remarkably, just 3.8% of these chocolates contain exclusively beans from West Africa: thirty-five from Ghana, nineteen from Ivory Coast, two from Nigeria, and none from Cameroon. Bars made with beans from Ivory Coast, the world’s leading cocoa producer, account for just 1.5% of the Census total. By contrast, bars made with beans from Ecuador capture the largest share of the Census (11.8%), followed by Venezuela (9.7%), Madagascar (5.9%), and Dominican Republic (5.6%).

This is an extraordinary gap. West Africa exports 70% of the world’s cocoa, but commands less than 4% of the bars listed in this comprehensive database. Narrowing the list to U.S.-based, bean-to-bar chocolate artisans results in just two who currently offer West Africa single origin bars, and both use Ghana beans: Rob Anderson of Fresco Chocolate and Scott Witherow of Olive and Sinclair. As single origin chocolate becomes more popular, the world’s leading producer region remains, as it is in mainstream confectionery, largely invisible.

Materiality: Trading West African Cocoa

U.S.-based artisans generally cite two material reasons for eschewing West Africa in their single origin lines. The first is predominant bean strain, the second, its scale of production. Many farmers in West Africa grow direct-sun-tolerant, pest- and disease-resistant hybrids, which tend to turn out
weakly flavored or bitter beans.\textsuperscript{23} Others grow purer varieties of the Amelonado strain (named for its melon-shaped pods), which descended from Amazonian stocks, but which do not produce the most complex flavors. Christian describes the profile of Amelonado as “baseline cocoa, coffee, leather, wood, spice (mainly cinnamon & vanilla), & infrequently red fruit.”\textsuperscript{24}

While this profile may sound as if it would make a delicious piece of chocolate, artisan makers often have other flavor priorities.

Colin Gasko of Rogue Chocolatier\textsuperscript{25} explains why he does not use West African cocoa:

The cacao there is not generally well suited for origin bars, due to its lack of drastic differentiation. For one, the genetics of the trees are not recognized as good stock for specialty cacao due to their low potential for “interesting” flavors. Ghanaian cacao, probably the best of the West African stuff, is fermented, dried and graded to have a strong cocoa profile with a high degree of consistency. Every step of the process seeks to reduce differentiation between farms, fermentations, and varieties of cocoa. This, in itself, is the opposite of what most of us are looking for in fine chocolate. Acidity, fruit, floral and other “origin” flavors can be there, but generally the cocoa flavor is the focus.\textsuperscript{25}

Cultivating a reliable “cocoa” flavor makes sense when the primary bean customers are industrial manufacturers who need to produce uniform candy bars. But for the artisan seeking a dynamic flavor profile, West Africa is an unlikely source.

The vast scale of production also makes small amounts difficult to procure. Although this problem is not limited to West Africa, Gasko explains that as an artisan, he does not purchase enough cocoa to buy from this region: “Nobody wants to sell me small quantities from these places, even if I paid steep premiums. Some medium-sized companies may start doing this, but I can’t get a one-metric ton ‘micro-lot’ at this time, and the air freight required would be ludicrously high and incredibly wasteful.”\textsuperscript{26}

If a large-enough purchase could be made, however, the artisan wishing to source from West Africa has two broad options. The first is to buy beans from Ivory Coast, Cameroon, or Nigeria, where markets are deregulated and they can, theoretically, gain direct access to growers. The other option is to buy beans from Ghana. As Gasko notes, Ghana’s cocoa is considered the best of the West African crops. Ironically, however, the mechanism that generates this high quality also limits accessibility.

From the 1980s onward, when agricultural economies worldwide dismantled regulatory mechanisms and industry protections as part of World Bank and International Monetary Fund structural adjustment stipulations for loans, Ghana alone retained significant government oversight of its cocoa.\textsuperscript{27} Though weakened by adjustment reforms,\textsuperscript{27} Ghana’s Cocoa Board retained quality control over its vast industry. Along with agricultural extension officers who share best husbandry practices, teams of Cocoa Board graders examine Ghana’s crop in rural depots and at the ports; graders take great care to assess beans for proper fermentation, weight, flavor, and size, sampling every shipment at least twice before export. With the most wide-reaching quality control program of any major producer country, Ghana’s crop is considered the best bulk cocoa in the world and commands a price premium for this reason.

But Cocoa Board also controls exports. About a dozen private companies in Ghana hold licenses to purchase cocoa from farmers, but they then sell it to Cocoa Board, which sells it to interested buyers.\textsuperscript{28} According to Art Pollard of Amano Artisan Chocolate,\textsuperscript{29} this arrangement limits his ability to source Ghana beans. As does Gasko, Pollard fosters a direct relationship with growers, often visiting cooperatives to study their strains and post-harvest practices (fermentation and drying) before he decides to buy the beans. An artisan wishing to source from Ghana has little choice but to buy through Cocoa Board, with no way of tracing origins or sourcing directly from exceptional farmers.\textsuperscript{30}

By contrast, neighboring Ivory Coast fully deregulated its cocoa market as part of adjustment reforms. This means that, if they chose, artisans could contact farmers in Ivory Coast directly to buy their beans—but no U.S. artisan today is doing this. Thus, the ability to source directly from farmers does not by itself guarantee that artisans will be attracted to Ivory Coast, Nigeria, or Cameroon. On the other hand, while they limit direct trade, Ghana’s regulations maintain its cocoa’s high quality. West Africa thus presents a material dilemma: though its cocoa supply is vaster than any on earth, there are few channels through which artisans can purchase superior beans.

The “Trouble” with West Africa

Yet since at least some U.S.-based premium chocolate makers do source from West Africa—and since there are other countries, notably Britain, France, and the U.A.E., where West Africa origin bars are more prevalent—material obstacles do not fully explain the tremendous gulf between the amount of cocoa grown in the region and the number of chocolate bars celebrating its origin sites. Another explanation involves the grave issue of U.S. media representations, and the persistent negative stereotypes that pervade depictions of the region’s people and cultures.

Outside of festivals and connoisseur tasting events, advertisement for single origin chocolate happens mainly through product packaging, where three elements capture the
shopper’s attention: origin name, an image of that place, and/or process descriptions (for example, “stone ground” by Taza, or varying conch times by Fresco). The origin is either a country—Grenada, Tanzania—or the region where the cocoa grows—Chuao (Venezuela), Guayas (Ecuador), or Sambirano (Madagascar). Sometimes, origin names refer to the cocoa strain (for example, Indio Rojo or Fortunato #4).

Packaging aesthetics range from whimsical (Moonstruck) to sober (Askinosie), but the primary lure is nearly always an exotic representation of chocolate’s origins. Two makers who use images to great effect here are Pollard and Gasko, whose elegant packaging invites shoppers to gaze at origins through exquisite renderings of the tree and its environs. Gasko’s Rogue Chocolatier bars present the same seductive image, in different muted colors, of two cocoa pods splayed among lush leaves.

Pollard uses a different image for each bar. Venezuela Montanya portrays Theobroma cacao as a mystical tree, with a phoenix-like bird soaring above. The Chuao bar of that famed Venezuelan valley, considered home to some of the best cocoa in the world, depicts the town’s blue-and-white church and a woman raking Chuao’s iconic circular piles of drying cocoa. Madagascar is an island paradise, with sapphire waters and palm-fringed beaches. Morobe invites us to the frontier of Papua New Guinea, featuring a lone man poling a canoe through a swamp.

The images are powerful, because they generate an escapist fantasy, inviting the shopper to experience a place more wonderful and tropical than wherever they are (probably) standing when buying the bar. While Rogue’s and Amano’s inviting visuals are the best of a broader representational trend, even makers who do not use images often rely on milder forms of place-based advertising and a soft appeal to the exotic. Unusual, seductive words—Sambirano, Dos Rios, Esmeraldas—localize the chocolate in a mysterious place, always far distant. Packaging also often underscores an aesthetic of eroticism (Askinosie and Kallari are notable exceptions). While they lack overt sexual images, single origin and other premium chocolates are unquestionably seductive and reflect contemporary North American associations of chocolate with love, and as pathway to—or substitute for—sex. This erotica is exquisitely fashioned and vaguely imperialist, inviting us to gaze at cocoa farmers and partake of the enticing sensuality of their surroundings.

Some parts of Africa can be incorporated successfully into this representational structure—for example, Madagascar, by far the most celebrated of African origin countries. Madagascar is an attractive origin largely because of its cocoa’s unusually bright, high citrus notes. But it also fits easily into an exotic framework, owing to its positive reputation in U.S. popular consciousness. An island nation, Madagascar seems culturally, historically, and politically separate from the troubled continent of Africa proper. Typical associations with Madagascar include vanilla and lemurs—the latter fostered, as my undergraduate students remind me every year in my chocolate class, by “that Disney movie.”

West Africa, however, fares ill within a representational framework that relies upon appeals to the exotic—or erotic.
Following the distinction made by scholar Curtis Keim, images of Africa in U.S. media fall generally into one of two categories—Africa as “trouble,” which includes poverty, conflict, debt, and HIV/AIDS, and Africa as “curiosity,” which involves tribal people wearing colorful clothes and beads, hunting, gathering, and living close to nature. While West Africa does have some “curiosity” associations, including vivid textiles and renowned musical traditions, “trouble” dominates. When I ask students to generate lists of words or events associated with West Africa, they typically include references to the decades-long civil conflicts and violence in Ivory Coast, Liberia, and Sierra Leone; urban slums and Internet scammers in Nigeria; human rights violations, especially around oil production in Nigeria and Cameroon, including the execution of activist Ken Saro-Wiwa; HIV/AIDS; debt; and poverty.
So ubiquitous are these stereotypes that chocolate makers and connoisseurs sometimes slip, no doubt unconsciously, into a racialized discourse of “trouble” when describing West Africa single origin bars. Jacques Torres’s Ghana bar is called “Dangerously Dark” (already veering toward “trouble”), and the website features the outrageous tagline, “So dark you could get a tan just by eating it”—thus drawing a link between danger, darkness, and skin color. In describing Torres’s “Haven Bar,” an earlier bar made from Ghana beans, a reviewer for Britain’s seventypercent.com offers a provocative, silently racialized assessment: “Torres has produced a good-looking bar with good sheen and temper and his stylish logo embossed on the surface. An ominously dark color, though indicative of its Ghanaian origins, evokes an unexplainable fear that these near black colors usually do.”

Now, there are material explanations for why a black color can produce an “unexplainable fear” in a chocolate connoisseur: the Dutching process of adding alkalizing agents to cocoa powder turns it very dark—like Oreo cookies—and premium chocolates are not typically Dutched. Different bean strains also produce variously colored cocoa, from red to brown to black. While some cultures (Mayan, Aztec, and European) have preferred red cocoa for aesthetic reasons, and a brown color suggests healthy beans, blackness is generally assumed to reflect poor genetics or husbandry. Yet reading from a racially charged U.S. context, the last sentence is too suggestive of a link between black bodies and fear. Associating Ghana with an “ominously dark color” that “evokes an unexplainable fear” can easily bring to mind an image of scary black Africans who cause so much “trouble.”

West Africa, of course, is not alone as a place of “trouble”—other cocoa-growing countries are also plagued by poverty, HIV/AIDS, and conflict. Indeed, agricultural economies are almost always poor, and some makers highlight this fact to sell chocolate. Appealing to a sense of social justice, they showcase hardworking farmers on their bars, to whom shoppers render economic assistance by purchasing the chocolate (the appeal also made by Fairtrade International). Askinosie Chocolate presents an illustrative case, with wrappers that feature photographs of hale farmers and information about the considerable development work the company conducts at each origin site. Kallari Chocolate, based in Ecuador, used to follow a similar pattern, featuring images of adorable children of the Amazon (now they use a colorful leaf).

West African cocoa farmers can also be portrayed as poor people working hard. Britain’s Divine Chocolate, which sources cocoa exclusively from Kuapa Kokoo cooperative in Ghana, has done the most extensive publicity to raise awareness of Ghana as a cocoa exporter, and is the most prolific maker of Ghana bars. Divine’s website, advertising, and marketing strategies (including contests, public lectures by farmers, and celebrity endorsements) are exceptional in their promotion of Ghana. Bar wrappers are stylishly decorated with Ashanti symbols, reflecting Kuapa Kokoo’s strong farmer base among that ethnic group and the common use of Ashanti cultural materials (such as Kente cloth) to represent Ghana as a whole.
In the U.S., however, successful promotion of West African origin sites seems to be more challenging. Rob Anderson of Fresco Chocolate notes that “West African cocoa doesn’t have the romance of other origins, such as a Venezuelan Chuao or Caranero,” which makes it difficult to draw upon the region’s “curiosity” elements. More tellingly, no U.S. chocolate maker today advertises a West Africa bar—Ghana or otherwise—using the social justice model and drawing attention to the region’s “troubles.” This is because the “trouble” of West Africa goes beyond the poverty of Askino-sie’s Tanzanian farmer or Kallari’s sweetly smiling Ecuadorian children. This “trouble” is the egregious blight of slavery.

While the international slave trade has been formally prohibited for two hundred years, the history of West Africa as the port of embarkation for slaves destined for the U.S. continues to resonate. More particularly for the cocoa trade, slavery has not been fully consigned to history, and its contemporary practice—though of a different scope to the historical trafficking of humans—remains a scar on the chocolate industry. Today, even the briefest research into West African cocoa reveals allegations of slave labor on plantations in Ivory Coast. Widespread public consciousness around this issue began in 2000, when British journalists Brian Woods and Kate Blewett produced Slavery: A Global Investigation, a film documenting slave labor on cocoa farms in Ivory Coast, as well as in carpet factories in India and domestic service in Washington, D.C. The film sparked outrage on both sides of the Atlantic, and subsequent highly publicized investigations delved further into the issue. Slavery was followed by an initiative by House Representative Eliot Engel (Democrat, New York) and Senator Tom Harkin (Democrat, Iowa) to establish a slave-free label requirement for chocolate. The label never materialized, but their efforts resulted in the Harkin-Engel Protocol, a voluntary, nonbinding industry agreement to “eliminate the worst forms of child labor and forced labor from all cocoa farms worldwide by July 2005.”

Though allegations of slave labor have been limited mainly to Ivory Coast and documentation of these practices is patchy (the enormous scale of cocoa production in West Africa makes it impossible to conduct a thorough assessment of labor across the region), widespread media attention has cast West Africa on the whole as an anachronistic place where primitive forms of slavery run rampant. The lead from a recent Mother Jones article (“Bloody Valentine”) is typically sensationalist and macabre: “If you gave someone chocolate for Valentine’s Day, it may well have come from the Ivory Coast... And if it did come from the Ivory Coast, it may well have been harvested by unpaid child workers being held captive on plantations—that is to say, child slaves.”
As anthropologist James Ferguson has documented, negative perceptions about Africa make foreigners wary to invest on the continent, where capital investment is much needed. It is a grim cycle: negative stereotypes foster a political economic reality of low investment, which reinforces the idea that Africa is a bad place to invest, which further circumscribes investment, and so on. The slave labor allegations and media reports, while admirably drawing attention to an egregious practice, have also had the damaging effect of portraying West Africa as an unsafe origin for quality-conscious makers—a portrayal that is highly unlikely to assist the hundreds of thousands of smallholder farmers across the region who make a marginal but honest living growing cocoa for chocolate.

U.S. artisans are, on the whole, stout in their commitment to both ethics and quality. While they purchase costly flavor beans and can thus improve the livelihoods of poor farmers, they are also unlikely to buy from a place with a negative image—such as West Africa. Colin Gasko, who has not sourced from West Africa, although he is considering it, remarked: “How do you buy cacao from West Africa in a way that is socially responsible, given its reputation and political climate? Well, I don’t know, and that’s the problem. When systems of exportation lump lots [of cocoa beans] and thereby eliminate real traceability, how do you track down where the raw materials you bought actually came from? This isn’t just a problem with West Africa…but it isn’t simple to get around with countries that deal with larger volumes, such as Ghana.”

Rob Anderson is similarly cautious, and has so far only made a limited run of Ghana bars: “I had been looking for some Ghana [beans] for some time but could not find a source with a solid and reputable story. Although I don’t explicitly market as fair trade, when it comes to West African product I am extra cautious about sourcing for obvious reasons.” He buys beans from this region only when “the source is reputable and can be trusted—fair price to farmers, verified no slavery—and the cocoa has something unique to offer.” Anderson procured Ghana Fairtrade-certified beans from nearby Seattle maker Theo Chocolate. Now that Theo no longer sources from Ghana, however, Anderson’s supply is limited to what he has on hand. “I have not found another source I trust,” he says, “so once my existing supply is used up I will be out of stock indefinitely.”

Makers have different opinions about whether the chocolate-consuming public actually does hold negative stereotypes about West Africa. John Kehoe, Vice President of Sourcing and Development for Tcho Chocolate, believes that people in the industry perceive West Africa as a place to avoid—not consumers. The Tcho bar that uses Ghana beans is, Kehoe says, their best seller. Yet Anderson argues that when consumers start to investigate West Africa, the likely result is that they avoid chocolate that originates there: “The West African stigma is going to be very difficult to overcome. Many people just beginning their chocolate education are exposed to generic dogma—Hershey, Mars and Nestlé chocolate comes from West Africa, it’s junk cocoa traded…for eighty-five cents a pound, it’s industrial cocoa…to be pressed for cosmetic cocoa butter—the list goes on. Although much of this can be accurate, it generalizes West Africa and makes it difficult to extract higher value from these origins.”

Certainly media attention to slavery allegations makes it easy for consumers to reject West Africa as a “safe” source of chocolate. But when artisans or mid-size companies (such as Tcho) offer a bar from West Africa, they apparently can generate significant sales. As Tcho has proven with its best-selling Ghana bar, and Divine with its entire product line, West Africa bars can be successfully sold in the U.S.—provided the maker has already inspired trust with a clear statement of its social mission.

Ghana Flavor

Despite the formidable proscriptions on West Africa, one of the strongest arguments for sourcing its cocoa for single origin chocolate may actually be flavor—at least when it comes to Ghana beans, whose “generic” cocoa profile is not necessarily a drawback. Indeed, Mark Christian laments the demise of what he calls “true Amelonado cocoa” due to the widespread introduction of hybrids in West Africa. Far from disdaining this profile, Christian wishes that something would be done to preserve “authentic Ghana flavor,” such as it may be. Anderson agrees: “Ghana beans can be extremely flavorful. It’s true they are typically less complex…but what is unique about Ghana is that the cocoa typically doesn’t possess a strong fruit, earth, or nut character…just a pronounced cocoa note. I find a majority of people like Ghana for its pure chocolate character.” Tcho has also capitalized on this familiar Ghana flavor with its “Chocolatey” bar—the aforementioned bestseller.

Ghana single origin bars express differences that are profound, interesting, and delicious, and flavors change across tastings, suggesting a complexity that most connoisseurs deny. Fresco Ghana 73% medium roast, medium conch (cocoa beans, cane sugar, cocoa butter) is robust and earthy, starting out with a mineral, metallic tang, building to a plateau of cinnamon, and finishing with a solid note of chocolate. Other times, the same bar tastes of tobacco, wood, and leather. Tcho Rogerson, who is the only domestic chocolate producer to yet sell a bar made exclusively with Ghana beans, says that Ghana beans tend to have “a more woody, earthy flavor, with a robust character.”

While Kehoe finds Tcho bars with Ghana beans “too earthy and too woody,” he can see the potential, believing that the Ghana beans he sources are “just a pronounced cocoa note.” In fact, he goes on to explain how Tcho introduced three different Ghana flavor profiles: “We have a high cocoa note, I find a majority of people like Ghana for its pure chocolate character.” Tcho has also capitalized on this familiar Ghana flavor with its “Chocolatey” bar—the aforementioned bestseller.
“Chocolatery” 70% (cocoa, cane sugar, cocoa butter, soy lecithin, vanilla beans) can taste like a blade of grass or pile of fresh hay—raw greenery. Other times, there is a balanced note of cinnamon against a foundation of loamy soil. Divine 70% Dark (cocoa mass, sugar, cocoa butter, soya lecithin, vanilla) calls to my mind the jute sacks of cocoa beans that lay in towering piles all across Ghana, and tastes of undried grass.

French makers are again different. Jacques Torres brings out a heavy roast in his Dangerously Dark 72% (sugar, cocoa butter, cocoa paste, soya lecithin, vanilla). The bouquet has a scent of wood smoke, and the taste is campfire, cinnamon, and nutmeg, with a buttery melt and black pepper finish. La Maison du Chocolat Akosombo Noir 68% (cocoa paste, sugar, cocoa butter, soya lecithin, vanilla natural flavoring) has a lighter roast, with a more herbaceous and spicy profile of green tea, nutmeg, and spice cake. Francois Pralus Ghana 75% (Forastero organic cocoa, sugar, pure cocoa butter, GMO-free soya lecithin) tastes of pure toast—delicate bread and wood oil, warm and crispy, with a burst of matcha green tea at the finish.

In their range and expressiveness, each of these bars deserves a place in celebrated single origin lines. That Ghana bars are both exquisitely flavored and scarce suggests that single origin chocolate as a whole would be enriched if more bars used cocoa beans from the innumerable growers who remain invisible across the region.

### Changing Perceptions through Chocolate

In illuminating the politics of single origin chocolate and its relative neglect of West Africa, I am not suggesting that U.S. artisans must now source beans from that region as ethical practice. Artisans are, by definition, small-scale manufacturers and many of them are family-and-friend operations already stretched to the maximum use of their resources. There are, moreover, numerous flavor strains close to home, in Central and South America, the Caribbean, and Hawaii. A large-scale replanting of finicky flavor strains in West Africa is also unlikely, and probably undesirable in a context where sturdy, high-yielding hybrids will do the most to alleviate the worst pressures of poverty. (Though there are some laudable efforts to cultivate flavor bean production in Ghana, including the Fine Flavor Cocoa Project, a partnership among the Cocoa Research Institute of Ghana, private companies [including Tcho Chocolate], and agricultural research organizations.)

And yet if more U.S. artisans sourced cocoa from this region and named the countries prominently on their bars—Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon—then single origin chocolate from West Africa might function as a positive representation, working against the exclusively grim and often sensationalist media reports about these places. Each excellent bar that tastefully names its source as West Africa opens up a space for chocolate eaters to consider the region in a positive light, and cultivates a reason to see beyond its “troubles.” Slavery, war, poverty, and HIV/AIDS alone do not define the lives and livelihoods of West African women and men.

West Africa is a place where people lead busy lives making honorable livings, including growing and trading cocoa. A superb piece of chocolate from this region can foster images of expert agriculturalists, prolific trees, flavorful beans, and decent traders. It can shift our emotional investment from pity or horror to gratitude for the countless honest farmers who grow cocoa there. As thin a beam as it may be, single origin chocolate from West Africa can shine light on the humanity of a part of the world too often portrayed as hopeless chaos.

### Notes

2. In the Americas and Europe, it has become standard to refer to the issue of *Theobroma cacao* as “cacao.” However, in Anglophone West Africa and Southeast Asia, where I have conducted most of my research, farmers and other industry professionals use the word “cocoa.” Hence, “cocoa” is my preferred term in this article on the marginalization of West Africa—Ghana in particular—in single origin chocolate.
11. I arrived at this figure by gleaning makers from Mark Christian’s C-Spot Chocolate Census (discussed below), and the roster of exhibitors at the 5th Chocolate Festival, the largest gathering of bean-to-bar artisan makers in the U.S., http://nwchocolate.com/. I counted bean-to-bar makers who self-label as “artisan” or “craft maker,” and/or who use the terms “small-batch” or “hand-crafted” to describe their chocolate. In addition to the thirty-seven, eight other U.S. chocolate companies may also qualify as bean-to-bar artisans, but do not provide sufficient information to confirm.


16. U.S. companies currently make or previously made seventeen of these bars, including four by Nashville-based bean-to-bar artisan Olive and Sinclair. The remaining eighteen are produced in Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Ghana, Poland, and Switzerland. I found an additional eighteen West Africa single-origin bars not listed on the Census, which seem to be currently in production in France, Germany, Malaysia, New Zealand, Spain, South Korea, and the U.S.: seventeen that use Ghana beans and one that uses beans from Cameroon. The Ghana bars include two by Fresco Chocolate (discussed below).

17. The Dubai-based company Al Nasmah produces five of the Ivory Coast bars, and various French companies, another five. Of the nine U.S. chocolates made with Ivory Coast beans, at least one is no longer in production (Theo Ivory Coast), and two are toothpastes for children by Remou.

20. Unless otherwise noted, I based all descriptions of Ghana’s cocoa industry on my doctoral fieldwork, conducted there in 2005.
23. All quotes by Colin Gasko, Art Pollard, Rob Anderson, and John Kehoe are from interviews I conducted with these chocolate makers between October 2011 and March 2012.

28. The only exception is the Fairtrade-certified cooperative, Kuapa Kokoo, which is permitted to sell a portion of its cocoa directly to overseas manufacturers under Fairtrade International auspices.

33. The best option for naming West Africa bars seems to be a sedate pronounce-ment of origins. Francois Pralus, Pierre Marcolini, Fresco, and Tcho simply state “Ghana” on their elegant packages. Others follow the pattern of naming origin bars after a specific region, and call their products “Across” (Felchlin bar, Amano nibs)—though no cocoa trees, to my knowledge, grow in Ghana’s capital city—“Akosombo” (La Maison du Chocolat), which is the name of Ghana’s Volta River Dam; or, most plausibly, “Asante” (Scharffen Berger), a variant spelling of Ashanti, a prominent ethnic group in Ghana with a long history of cocoa production.
45. For example, in my annual course, “Chocolate: A Global Inquiry,” at the University of Washington Bothell, students sample a range of single origin bars over the term. Every year for the past four years, the favorite chocolate among the majority has been Divine, made exclusively with Ghana beans.
46. If single origin bars from Ivory Coast, Nigeria, and Cameroon were more numerous, this sentiment might be extended to those origins as well, but their scarcity makes it difficult to judge.