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The Amano Chocolate Story

It was more than ten years ago when Art Pollard realized that the chocolate familiar to most Americans fell well short of the little bean's full potential. Thus began his search for the "ultimate chocolate."

With a background in scholarship and engineering, Art pored through chocolate books both old and modern. He visited cocoa plantations in Mexico and other cocoa growing regions as well as manufacturing plants in Europe. He experimented with the tools of the chocolatier's art, tinkering in his garage with both traditional chocolate-making equipment and equipment of his own design. Over time, he perfected his technique and developed his own chocolate methodology focused exclusively on quality.

Produced in tiny batches from the finest hand-selected cacao on the planet, Pollard's chocolate soon garnered rave reviews from the handful of local chefs who tried it, and before long demand far outpaced supply. Recognizing an opportunity, Art's business partner, Clark Goble, suggested that Amano produce its chocolate for everyone.

Pollard chose the Rocky Mountain town of Orem, Utah, for his new chocolate factory, believing that the town's high altitude and dry climate would have a beneficial effect on his chocolate. Situated at the foot of Utah's Wasatch range—4,441 feet (1,454 meters) above sea level—Amano is one of the highest-altitude chocolate manufacturers in the world.

With the increase in production capacity the company now offers several distinct varieties of chocolate bars, both dark chocolates containing 70% cacao solids as well as milk chocolates. Amano is now inviting chefs and consumers who are passionate about chocolate to purchase the "ultimate chocolate."

Quality Begins In the Bean

The same way that great wine begins in the vineyard, superior chocolate begins in the bean. Amano's founder works with cacao farmers to improve their growing, fermenting and drying techniques, and to be careful stewards of the land. In exchange for meeting Amano's exacting standards, local farmers receive three to four times the going market price – well above the so-called "fair trade" price.

According to Art Pollard, "Amano always pays farmers and co-ops significantly more for their product than is set by the 'fair trade' organizations. It is a very costly and lengthy process for a farmer to become fair-trade certified, and most simply can't afford it. We believe in paying a premium price for premium cocoa beans – typically three to four times the London Cocoa Terminal Market price. This ensures that we obtain the highest quality beans available and that the farmers we buy from can provide for their families. We don't pay the prices we pay to get a label on our package. We do it because it is the right thing to do."

This also ensures that many indigenous cacao tree, each with their own unique flavor, are preserved for the world. Many farmers are under tremendous pressure to plant species of trees which produce much more cacao per tree but which simply lack the flavor the fruit of the local trees do. Offering farmers a premium price for a premium crop ensures that the world can continue to have fine chocolate by letting farmers afford to make a quality crop. The alternative, as Art Pollard has noted, is for most of the worlds chocolate to become a common low quality industrial chocolate. (As has happened with far too many crops around the world)

70% Cacao

The percentage of cacao solids in chocolate measures how much of the chocolate is actually made from cocoa bean, whether in the form of chocolate liquor (ground cocoa bean) or cocoa butter (made by pressing the fat out of the ground cocoa bean).

Some manufacturers add cocoa powder, although Amano never does, as this dilutes the flavor. The remaining content is typically comprised of sugar and vanilla to help round out the flavor. As a rule, the higher the cacao percentage, the richer and less sweet the chocolate.

The cacao content of chocolate is not necessarily a reflection of quality. Says Art Pollard, "The best chocolate is the chocolate that you enjoy the most." He encourages consumers to use the

cacao percentages to gauge the richness of a particular chocolate. The best way to determine personal preference is to sample a variety of chocolates with different cacao content.

Maintaining a 70% cacao content in Amano's bars lets consumers know that all the flavors they taste are due to the cacao beans themselves and not sugar. If one bar is sweeter than another they can know it is because of the beans themselves.

Conching

A central feature of chocolate-making is conching—essentially a process of stirring or mixing the chocolate for an extended period of time. Even those schooled in the chocolatier's art often misunderstand the impact of conching on the flavor and texture of chocolate. Amano conches chocolate to:

- Reduce the moisture content
- Allow volatile oils and other ingredients to evaporate
- Reduce the acidity of the chocolate through the evaporation of acetic acid
- Round off the particulates within the chocolate through the use of friction
- Develop the flavor more fully by allowing the flavor components to permeate the cocoa butter more fully

The early conches, called longitudinal conches, consisted of a granite roller that moved back and forth in a trough, slowly grinding the chocolate to complete the refining process. While conche design has evolved considerably in the past 100 years, conching remains an important part of the chocolate-manufacturing process.

There is no prescribed length of time to conche chocolate. Amano's practice is to conche chocolate until it is done. To claim a certain number of conching hours ignores the variations in beans, temperature, and the type of conche being used. Just as cooking time is part of the chef's art, so is conching time a function of the chocolate-maker's art.

Amano Artisan Chocolate was founded on the premise that chocolate lovers deserved a product worthy of their passion, and creating that product requires a devotion to detail and quality that begins at the source of the beans, carries through the small-batch, handmade manufacturing process, and ends with Amano's Single Origin Chocolate bars that exceed even Art Pollard's exacting expectations.