

Food

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Three Vancouver chocolatiers that think outside the box

by Anya Levykh on June 9th, 2024 at 4:02 AM



Hype Chocolate. LIZ ROSA

These three Vancouver-based chocolate makers are not only creating (extremely) good chocolates—they're also doing good for people and for communities.

Koko Monk

For Paul Dincer, chocolate was originally plan B. After teaching pastry in Australia, he arrived in Canada in 2008 to pursue a PhD in film studies. Instead, he became fascinated by the creative aspects of working with raw chocolate and its myriad health benefits, which led him to open Koko Monk in 2013.

His philosophy was simple: create ethically- and organically-sourced bean-to-bar chocolate, with a minimum of fillers and sweeteners, from unprocessed, raw cacao grown in Central and South America.

"Cacao is a sacred food," explains Dincer of that part of the world. "It's a pillar of the civilization; they created a whole religion around it. We work strictly with cooperatives or directly with the farmers." The growers he works with "understand the importance of agro-forestry—of the symbiotic nature between the environment and how the cacao trees grow."

Dincer stresses the importance of maintaining the bean's nutrients by avoiding traditional processing methods.

When it's raw, he says, "you can clearly see the pure identity of the bean." That identity is not uniform across batches, which for him is a benefit, as it emphasizes the unique flavour characteristics of each tree, each farm, each harvest. The terroir of the bean, if you will.



Koko Monk.

Sweetened mainly with honey, dates, coconut sugar, maple sugar, or monkfruit sugar (which he creates himself directly from fruit that he imports), his chocolates and bars also hit the low-glycemic-index sweet spot for those seeking diabetic-friendly—or just healthier—treats.

The result is lusciously rich chocolate and award-winning hot chocolate beverages that are also good for you.

"It's about eating food that is still alive," Dincer explains, "so that your whole mouth, your body, feels and tastes what you are eating—not just your taste buds."

Koko Monk Chocolates is located at 2883 West Broadway.

Hype Chocolate

Across town on East Hastings Street, chocolatier Scott Symons and his partner Marlayna Pincott have been running Hype Chocolate since 2022, when Symons created a chocolate sneaker, the Hype 1 (an ode to Air Jordans), that sold 1,000 units in two weeks.

The pair wanted to combine Symons' chocolate obsession and love of sneaker and snack culture with Pincott's art, design, and fashion background, as well as her active involvement as a community mentor and advocate.

"Half of our employees are mentees who were high-risk youth or are reintegrating back into society," says Pincott. "We work with people on an emotional level, as well as training them so that they can move up within the company."

Hype's social passion is matched by its founding duo's passion for high-quality, minimally sweetened chocolate bars, gummy bears, ice cream sandwiches, and other retro treats, including custom sodas, sundaes, and soft ice cream. The intensely flavoured gummies (which are also halal due to the use of beef gelatin rather than the usual pork) range from guava and lychee-jasmine to a smoky bourbon and vibrant mango margarita. "Gummies aren't usually flavour-forward and we wanted to change that," says Symons. Their "bigger, better gummies" have become a byword among candy cognoscenti.

As for the chocolate, Symons works with Barry Callebaut's Cocoa Horizons foundation, which supports farmers in growing ethical, sustainable, and traceable cacao. Hype's line of more than 100 different chocolate bars has resulted in wildly popular flavours like the spicy instant ramen and orange creamsicle, as well as more traditional options like sea salt dark chocolate and s'mores.



MIKE CHATWIN

The fun combinations and playful shapes have led to partnerships with the likes of Canada Goose and Holt Renfrew.

Those who are curious can walk into Hype's storefront and sample the available flavours of chocolate and gummies before purchasing. "We want to be more inclusive and accessible than traditional chocolate shops," says Pincott.

That goal has also led to meaningful collaborations with groups like the Chinatown Storytelling Centre and the Canadian Deafblind Association. Because doing good for the community can be delicious.

Hype Chocolate is located at 855 East Hastings Street.

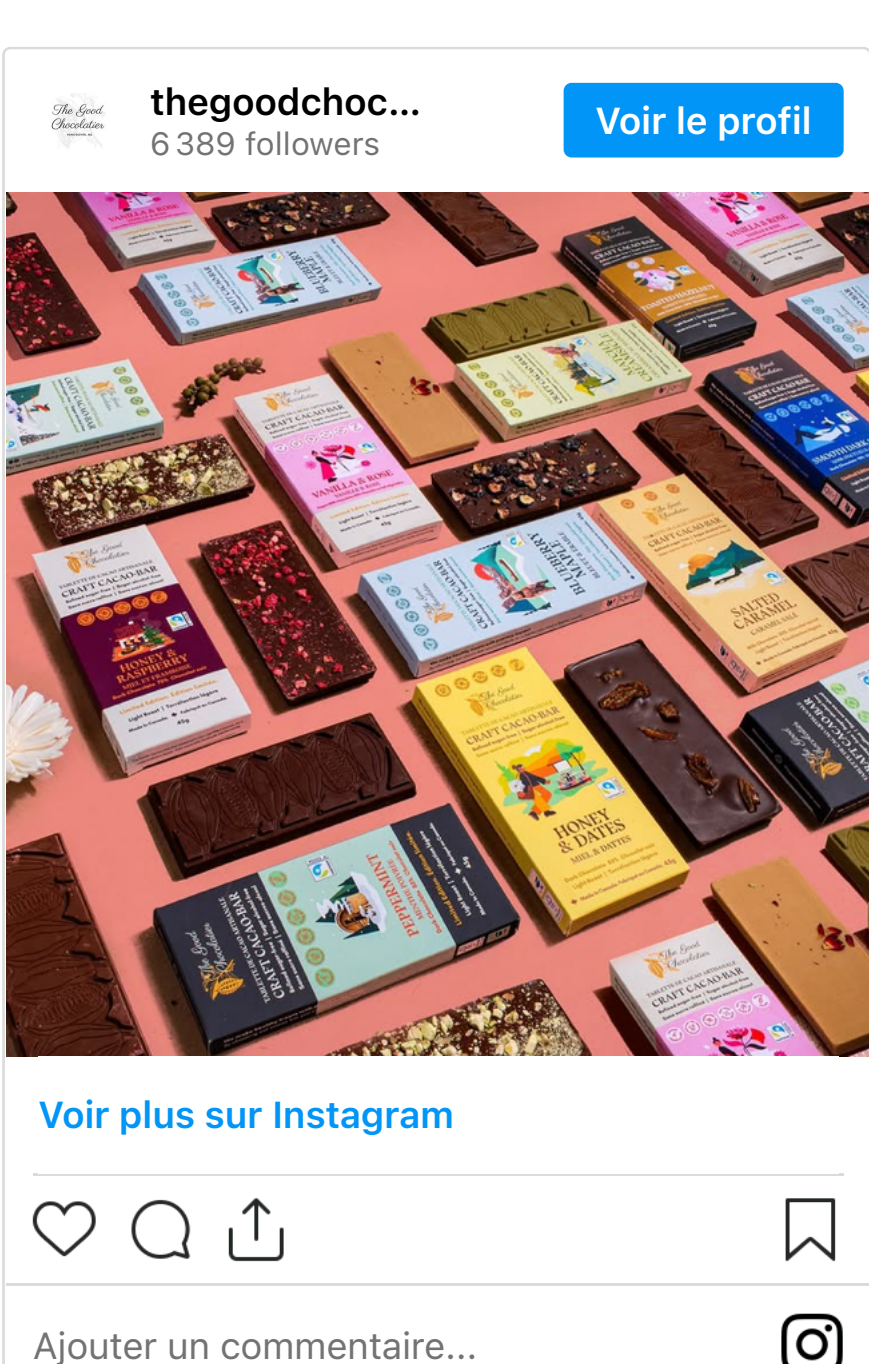
The Good Chocolatier

The idea of inclusivity and, more specifically, accessibility, led Mara Mennicken, along with her business partner Laura Lam, to open The Good Chocolatier as a social enterprise. The tiny counter inside Greens Market on West Broadway is the launchpad for Mennicken's work with PALS Adult Services Society (PASS), which helps neurodiverse adults, including those on the autism spectrum, to overcome workplace barriers.

"I was so fascinated by the concept of social enterprises," Mennicken explains, "and the potential of what they could do for the socio-economic issues that society is dealing with."

Mennicken's interest in chocolate started back in Germany when she began to crave the sweet treat during her own journey to cleaner eating and better health.

"The healthier my diet became, the more I wanted chocolate," she says with a laugh. When she moved to Vancouver in 2015 to study community leadership and social change, she met chocolatier Pierre Gruget and worked with him for two years—and eventually took over and revamped his business.



Mennicken only uses lightly roasted Ecuadorian Criollo cacao, considered some of the best in the world, with alternative sweeteners such as coconut sugar and monkfruit. The bars max out at about nine grams of sugar for an entire bar—the darker varieties sit at around four to five grams—making them very suitable for diabetics (and for those just looking to reduce their sugar intake). Her chocolates are also organic, plant-based, and fair trade.

"Cacao butter is so rich that you don't need dairy if you're using the whole bean," Mennicken explains. Thanks to how they're made, even the darkest chocolate bars, at more than 90 per cent cacao, aren't bitter. It's a sweet win, no matter how you bite it.

The Good Chocolatier is located inside of Greens Market at 1978 West Broadway.



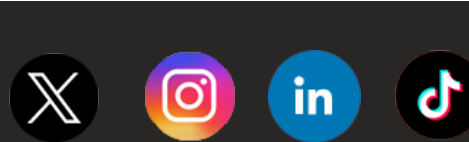
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