

BEAN TO BAR

A CHOCOLATE TOUR IS THE BEST WAY TO UNDERSTAND WHAT GOES INTO MAKING ARGUABLY ONE OF THE MOST LOVED OF ALL FOODS. AND PONDICHERRY'S MASON & CO DOES JUST THAT, WITH AN ORGANIC TWIST.

BY BINDU GOPAL RAO

Mason & Co was founded by Jane Mason and Fabien Bontems

close to five years ago. When they came to India, Jane, a trained vegan raw food chef, realised that it was very hard to find good quality dark chocolate here. She soon discovered that there was cacao being grown in India and hence started using them to make chocolates at home. A Mumbai-based friend happened to taste the chocolates and asked Jane to package them to retail in her store. Soon the chocolates became such a big hit that the couple decided to start Mason & Co.

The main reason the chocolate tastes so good is that the company only works with certified organic farmers. There are three important steps that happen on these farms (mainly in Tamil Nadu and Kerala) that impact the eventual taste of the chocolate. This includes the actual harvesting process where the ripest cacao beans are selected. The next step is fermentation when the harvested beans are removed from the pods and are placed in wooden boxes for a week which develops the flavour. The beans ferment in their own juices.

The beans are then sun-dried and packed in jute sacks before



being shipped to the chocolate factory. The company works with the farmers and explains the kind of processing required and consults with them rather than actually own the farms. This being a bean to bar company, they buy the cacao beans from the farmers as opposed to many other chocolate makers who buy the cacao powder.

The tour starts at the factory where the next set of processes happen after receiving the raw cacao beans. The first step in the factory is sorting and grading the beans that are done by hand. The small beans and the ones that are stuck cannot be used to make chocolate but are sent to local farms to be used as fertilizers as the factory believes in minimising waste. Once the right beans are selected they are slow-roasted in a machine that develops the flavour and sterilises the beans. This is similar to a coffee roaster and once roasted they are cooled on a tray and are not touched by hand.