

MUTARI

nwrapping the facts of craft chocolate

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Mutari

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Nonalcoholic drinks have gained prominence in America's hangout culture ever since the teens of the 1950s started splitting milkshakes at diners and carbonated drinks at drugstore soda fountains. Over the years, coffeehouses claimed the title of designated social stimulant. But in years to come, could a newcomer dethrone coffee as the conversational beverage of choice? A drinking chocolate shop called Mutari, located in the affably offbeat town of Santa Cruz, allows for a glimpse of what might be.

As soon as the curious passerby cracks the door of Mutari, there's no turning back. The scent of chocolate comes out to greet visitors and then ushers them inside. Within, empty cacao bags hang on the walls, burlap sides stamped with names and symbols of various origins. Choose the drinking chocolate flight (two thicker sipping chocolates alongside two hot chocolates), claim a 72 percent Venezuelan chocolate brownie, or simply browse the selection of White Label Chocolate (Mutari's bean-to-bar line)—then get to know the owners behind the counter.

After years of experience in the food industry—Katy Oursler grew the farm-to-table movement and Stephen Beaumier worked as a chef at a number of Michelin-starred restaurants—both embraced the chance to delve into the specifics of a single ingredient. And why not one as well-loved as cacao? More than 764 tons of chocolate are consumed by Americans a year—the equivalent weight of five adult blue whales or 153 bull elephants.

Mutari's owners are continuously unearthing new information about this exceptional bean. "We want people to learn something every time they come here," Beaumier says, "no matter if they've come one time or a dozen times or a hundred times." They'll point out Nerf football-sized cacao pods on the shelf, then describe how these are cracked open with a machete before the beans can be detached from a vein called the placenta. They describe how the wet cacao travels to central fermentaries and drying beds, then voyages on to its final resting place at Mutari. The beans then take a subsequent journey through the shop's in-house machines. They're hand-sorted, cycled in batches through a roaster, husked with a winnower to extract the cacao nib, smashed into cocoa liquor with a pre-grinder, further ground for over 24 hours in a melanger, poured onto sheet pans, then shredded and bottled. From bean to final product, the preparation process takes more than quadruple the amount of time coffee beans do.

But Oursler, Beaumier, and other craft chocolate makers share a commonality with baristas, as well as sommeliers. They understand that, like coffee beans and wine grapes, the taste of cacao beans varies drastically depending on their origin, and they seek to accentuate rather than mask those differences, from the cream and citrus notes of cacao from Kilombero Valley, Tanzania, to the spruce and spice notes of Ucayali, Peru.

MUTARI CHOCOLATE







This appreciation is what sets quality chocolate apart from those one-dollar bars you can buy in bulk at the grocery store. There's a reason behind that cheap price tag. "Big Chocolate," as Beaumier refers to them, stuffs their bars with ingredients like vanillin (synthetic vanilla), soy lecithin (a GMO emulsifier), and that ominously vague umbrella of additives lumped together under "artificial flavors." Craft chocolate, on the other hand, consists of four or fewer ingredients: cacao, sugar, and occasionally cacao butter and vanilla. Craft chocolatiers also pay above adequate market prices for cacao beans, supporting quality product from farmers.

From its launch, Mutari has attracted several followings. Those from culturally diverse backgrounds revel in the chance to experience home away from home through the various origins, vegans appreciate that the drinks are made with coconut milk, inquisitive souls find kindred spirits

in the shop's staff, and experiential foodies adore the atmosphere. "We love having this cozy space that feels almost outdated in a fantastic way," Oursler mentions. There are also the night owls who arrive when the shop is converted into an alcohol-free lounge in the evenings.

You may be surprised to learn that people with a sweet tooth are not one of Mutari's target groups. Though some confections are served, they're not sugary sweet. "We're not just slinging sweets out the door," Beaumier explains. Oursler agrees, "We're not so much a candy shop. If they want candy, we're the first people to send them to Marini's around the corner." If, however, you're looking to encounter chocolate in a delightfully startling way, look no further than Mutari. 