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## Being Mindful About What's in Your Chocolate

Here's how to ensure your favourite sweet treat isn't stuffed with additives or unethically harvested—plus, a simple savouring practice to fully indulge your sweet-tooth.

BY [KELLE WALSH](#) | OCTOBER 22, 2019



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Do you like your chocolate sweet and creamy, bitter and dark, or perhaps a bit fruity or with notes of smoke? Whatever flavor you desire, rest assured there's a bar for that. As the global demand for chocolate keeps growing, amounting to \$98 billion in annual sales, the options keep coming.

And thanks to a craft chocolate boom, the world's favorite confection now enjoys a foodie reputation rivaling coffee and wine—with prices to match. In some groceries and specialty shops, it's not unusual to find small-batch, single-source chocolate bars costing up to \$15.

Yet despite its sunny, universal appeal, creating chocolate remains an intensive process with a far-reaching impact. The chocolate trade is rife with human and environmental abuses, making enjoyment of this delicious treat far more complicated for the mindful consumer.

## The Price of Chocolate

In the West African countries of Ivory Coast and Ghana, where nearly two thirds of the world's cacao is grown, increased crop demand has led to widespread deforestation. These impoverished nations, where cacao farmers typically earn below the World Bank's international poverty line of \$1.90 per day, are also the site of the industry's greatest labor and human rights abuses, including child and slave labor. A 2015 US Labor Report estimated that more than 2 million children work in cacao production.

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Despite public scrutiny and pressure, including from the US Congress, the largest chocolate producers haven't been able to stop the problem. Watch groups point to the root issue of extreme poverty in these regions, which feeds desperate measures, even as the world

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chocolate industry.

These factors have led to urgent efforts by human rights and environmental groups, as well as a growing group of small-scale chocolate producers, to prioritize sustainable cacao farming and production, fair labor standards, and support of worker-owned co-ops to help stabilize farmer income. “At the core of fine chocolate there is an aspiration that looks to change the world for the better—through better chocolate,” TCHO chocolate’s Brad Kintzer wrote in *CandyUSA*.

Yet these efforts may not be enough, according to Cocoa Barometer, in its 2018 report on the industry. Price drops for sustainable cacao in the past few years threaten what gains may have been made toward incentivizing farmers to transition to sustainable practices. “If business as usual continues, it will be decades—if ever—before human rights will be respected and environmental protection will be a basis for sustainability in the cocoa sector,” the report warned.

The pressure has forced major players in the global chocolate industry to commit to buy 70% certified ethical and sustainable cocoa by 2020—a deadline that many in the industry doubt will be met.

In the meantime, what can a mindful chocolate-lover do to help? Choose wisely, say experts.

## Seal of Approval

A handful of organizations try to ensure standards for the chocolate industry that protect workers and the environment. You can look for these certifications on chocolate bar labels:

### **Fair Trade Certified**

Ensures the cacao comes from farms that provide fair wages and safe working conditions.

### **Equal Exchange**

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Farmers use sustainable farming methods. Many grow diverse crops, providing greater protection from weather and supporting wildlife. The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements is an umbrella organization for the organic market, with adopted principles of organic agriculture.

### **Rainforest Alliance**

Principles of sustainable farming are in place, including biodiversity conservation, natural resource conservation, planning and farm-management systems, and improved livelihood and human well-being. In 2018, Rainforest Alliance joined with UTZ Certified, another international certifying body, to create a new certification that addresses wages and livelihood in cacao production.

### **Non GMO Project Verified**

All ingredients come from plants, animals, or other organisms whose genetic material hasn't been artificially altered.

## **From Bean to Bar**

1. It all starts with cacao, a prolific tree that thrives within 20 degrees of the equator. The tree's large seedpods are manually harvested and then opened to expose the prized cacao beans inside.
2. Once removed, the beans are fermented and then dried, often on tarps or racks in the sun, for up to a week; roasted to confer a desired flavor; and winnowed to remove the outer shell.
3. The remaining cacao nibs are ground into a paste called chocolate liquor, and further processed to separate out the fat, or cocoa butter. The leftover solid, the cacao press cake, is milled into cocoa powder.
4. Chocolate liquor and cocoa butter (together called chocolate mass) are blended in varying amounts with sugar and other ingredients, such as vanilla or milk solids, to create a desired flavor. That mixture is then refined in an intensive heating and aeration process called conching, which smooths any residual graininess. (Some

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Chocolate bar labels reveal a lot of information. Megan Giller, author of *Bean-to-Bar Chocolate: America's Craft Chocolate Revolution*, offers tips for choosing chocolate that tastes great and was made with intention and care.

### **What's in it?**

"Cocoa beans or chocolate should always be the first ingredient, to ensure that it's a quality product," Giller says. If sugar is listed first, and if vegetable oil, artificial sweetener, or vanillin (opposed to real vanilla) are added, "these are all indicators that the chocolate is subpar," she adds.

### **How dark can you go?**

The percentage listed indicates the amount of cocoa mass used relative to other ingredients. The higher the percentage, the more concentrated the cacao—and the darker and more bitter the bar. A lower percentage indicates more non-cacao ingredients.

### **Where does it come from?**

The country listed indicates the cacao beans' origin. Beans from different regions confer different flavors. "Direct trade" or "sourced directly" indicates a relationship with local farmers. "The more a company includes information about the specific cocoa farmers they work with, the more you can guarantee that they're following sustainable and ethical standards," Giller says.

## **Savoring Practice**

### **Honor the Moment**

Take a moment to acknowledge the origin story behind the chocolate: where it came from; all the natural elements of sun, rain, soil, and wind that allowed the cacao to grow; the farmers who cultivated it; the chocolate maker who blended it with other ingredients to create the bar you hold right now; even the thought that went into the package design.

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## Experience Every Bite

When we eat we are often “doing” something else at the same time (working, looking at a device, talking with someone, reading, etc.), which takes away from tasting and fully enjoying the food. Try just eating the chocolate without any distraction, slowly savoring every bite.

## About The Author

### Kelle Walsh

Kelle is a contributing editor for *Mindful* magazine. She writes and edits from Boulder, Colorado, where she loves running trails and doing yoga, and trying to learn to ski. In the past, she served as managing editor and executive digital editor for *Yoga Journal*. A longtime mindfulness practitioner, she specializes in health and lifestyle journalism for publications including *Rodale's Organic Life* and *Experience Life*.

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