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Exclusive: Why Chef Thomas Keller Spent Years Crafting The Perfect Chocolate Bar

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The worldview from Los Angeles



K+M Chocolate is a partnership of chefs Thomas Keller and Armando Manni. Photography by Deborah Jones

When Thomas Keller says he's built a better chocolate bar, it's worth tasting the results. The multiple Michelin-starred chef (The French Laundry, Per Se, Bouchon) spent the past five years collaborating with Italian olive oil master Armando Manni to produce K+M Extravirgin Chocolate.

With fine cocoa beans sourced directly from farmers around the world, and a signature recipe using olive oil instead of traditional cocoa butter, K+M aims to be delicious but also healthy, given the significant antioxidant health benefits. And no, you don't taste the olive oil.

As an obsessive chocolate devotee (who happens to be married to a professional chocolatier), I was thrilled to learn about Chef Keller's goal to engineer great tasting chocolate. To learn more, I reached out for this exclusive interview with Keller, Manni and K+M Chocolatier Chi Bui.

The bars retail for \$14.95 each or eight for \$120 and can be purchased through Finesse the Store and Williams-Sonoma locations and williams-sonoma.com.

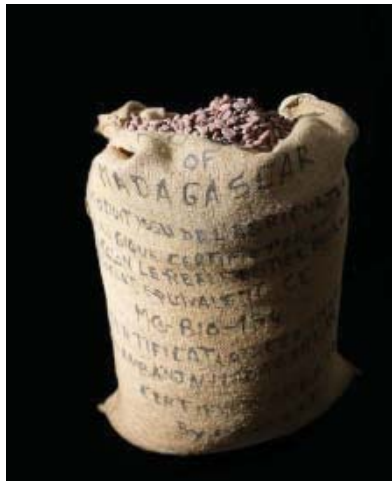
Here's part of our conversation:

Why chocolate and why now? Was the goal to make the world's greatest chocolate bar?

Thomas Keller: I wouldn't necessarily say 'why now' but more 'why chocolate?' is the question. You have to realize this has been over five years of work. K+M speaks to opportunities and how I embrace them. For me, K+M wasn't necessarily about chocolate so much as it was about my relationship with Armando and understanding his history and the quality of the work he's done with his olive oil. Looking at that as an example for a new chocolate was the real reason. This was going to be something unique and different, something that hadn't been done before –that's really the reason why.

Olive oil isn't common in chocolate bars. Why make it a key ingredient?

Armando Manni: In the typical chocolate-making process a percentage of cocoa butter is added to cacao, a saturated fat that is not adding to the chocolate taste or health benefits of the antioxidants. We decided to use a very small percent of Manni Oil instead of cocoa butter. You don't taste the olive oil in our chocolate but the presence of it adds extra antioxidants and creating a great synergy with the antioxidants of cocoa beans that we have been able to preserve through the chocolate-making process. The olive oil also gives the chocolate a velvety texture less brittle than normal dark chocolate.



Photography by Deborah Jones

What's special about the beans you source and/or your methods of sourcing? The standards for chocolate sourcing vary from direct trade to absolute mystery.

Chi Bui: We have very stringent guidelines when it comes to sourcing. We are focused on finding beans with complex and aromatic flavors that are organically farmed and traceable. They must also pass our scientific tests for antioxidant potential and fermentation.

Our Peru beans are special in that no one else has access to them. We are the only buyer of these directly traded beans. We traveled to Peru to meet the farmers, our exporter and to visit the farms and facilities. We've been working directly with people at each step in the process to buy these beans and have them shipped to our warehouse in Napa. Additionally, we've been working with our local exporter to develop the area to increase production and improve the post-harvest handling. We are fully committed to the region and will be making another trip to Peru during the harvest season to see how things are progressing and to reconnect with our farmers.



Photography by Deborah Jones

Talk about the origins of this collaboration. Any interesting or surprising moments about working together?

Armando Manni: I met Chef Keller the first time in 2002 at The French Laundry, where I presented our organic extra virgin olive oil. Thomas decided to use our oil in his restaurant and is still using it there and at Per Se in New York. Cut to 2010, after almost 10 years of friendship, and us having lunch together at Bouchon in Columbus Circle. I told him about my passion for chocolate and my frustration with the fact that the great quantity of antioxidants contained by cocoa beans were destroyed by the common process of chocolate making. It was clear to me that the antioxidants in cocoa beans were important not only for the health but also for the taste and smell of the chocolate. Because there was so much opportunity to vastly improve upon the 150-year-old approach to chocolate, Thomas agreed to investigate with me on this subject. Our goal was to develop the perfect chocolate. Over the past five years, working with the University of Florence, we have embarked upon scientific trials in developing a unique process. We like to say K+M Extravirgin chocolate is good for the body and good for the soul.

What's the taste difference between Peruvian, Madagascar and Ecuador beans in your lineup?

Chi Bui: All three origins differ greatly, not only in the location where the beans are cultivated but also in the different variety of beans being cultivated and the post-harvest handling. Taste-wise, Madagascar is lighter on the palette with some acidity. It has crisp and bright fruity notes and the slight bitterness of a grapefruit. Peru is more substantial on the palette, with the flavors being more complex and leaving a longer impression. Ecuador is the most full-bodied with a rich mouth feel. It has a noticeable lack of acidity, bitterness and astringency.

These bars are not inexpensive at \$14.95 each. What is it about them that demands the price?

Thomas Keller: It shouldn't necessarily be about price; it's about the value. The thing about The French Laundry, or any great restaurant like that, is that it's about the experience. If the experience that you've had is one that's elevated and brings value to the price - then it's worth it.

For us, with this product, it's about the fact that we feel this chocolate has this enormous value that no other chocolate has. For us to try and compete with the chocolates that are out there today from a price point of view is very difficult because our chocolate has never been done before. It's a whole different process, a whole different methodology, a different formulation - everything about it is different. Is it valuable to you? Are you willing to spend three dollars more on something that has a personal health benefit to you? It's a personal choice -- the same as coming to Per Se or The French Laundry.