



Cacao beans dry in the sun at Fond Doux, one of the oldest plantations on the island of St. Lucia.

Photos by Jenny Sathngam/Special Contributor

**CARIBBEAN**

## Chocolate is a way of life in St. Lucia

Follow the flavor from plant to plate

By MEGAN GILLER  
Special Contributor

**J**ALOUSLE, St. Lucia — Our tour guide, Cuthbert Monroque, practically shouts, “Do you know what type of cocoa tree this is from?”

He’s holding a vibrant purple pod about the size of a Nerf football as we stand next to a cluster of trees, all of which are different.

Monroque has just plucked a pod from a Trinitario tree, so that’s what each of us starts guessing, ever eager to be good students. Turns out it’s criollo, one of the rare trees that grows delicate-tasting cacao considered to be the best in the world. He hacks it open with a machete and lo and behold, it’s not filled with liquid chocolate but instead a fruity white pulp encasing about 50 cocoa beans. With frenetic energy, he passes it around, and we each pluck one bean



Hotel Chocolat’s greenhouse contains hundreds of cacao plants.

from the cone and suck on the pulp. “Jungle M&M’s,” he says with a charming grin.

That’s just the beginning of the tree-to-bar experience at Boucan’s Hotel Chocolat, a tiny boutique hotel nestled in the heart of St. Lucia. The Caribbean island is developing a reputation for organic chocolate, some of which is shipped off to companies like Lindt and Hershey’s, but most of which stays on the island itself.

Resorts like Jade Mountain and Boucan make their own chocolate bars

as well as truffles, ice creams, cakes, pastries and pretty much any chocolate delicacy you can imagine.

They’re building on a long chocolate tradition on St. Lucia, where locals drink cocoa tea almost every day. A grittier version of American hot chocolate, the tea consists of grated chocolate steeped in boiling water with cinnamon, bay leaves, nutmeg and sugar to make a fragrant, thick beverage that will cure any ailment.

See **FOLLOW** Page 5K

## Educating the palate in Hawaii

Plantation tasting tour focuses on pairing and savoring chocolate

By DIANA LAMBDIN MEYER  
Special Contributor

**KILAUEA, Hawaii** — It was a Friday morning in November, shortly after 11 on the island of Kauai, when Denise Acton of Highland Park discreetly pulled a little bottle of red wine from her purse and took a sip. Quickly, she slipped it into hiding again.

Those who witnessed the act did not think less of Acton for her little impropriety. Indeed, we were envious of her preparedness and called her out to share.

We had just finished an engaging tour of a cacao plantation on Kauai and were beginning to sample some of the chocolates made from cacao harvested in the area. What goes better with chocolate than a little red wine?

“In my defense, it was just a little bottle left over from our flight,” a laughing Acton said. “And our guide had just mentioned how well chocolate pairs with wine.”

About half of the three-hour tour with Garden Island Chocolate focused on tastings and pairings, including hot chocolate and fresh fruits that enhanced the flavor of the chocolate. But it was the first 90 minutes or so that we mainlanders enjoyed the most.

Cacao, we learned, only grows in an area about 20 degrees north or south of the equator. The island of Kauai is the most northern place in the world where it grows. Cacao has been cultivated in Hawaii for about 200 years.

As we walked through a garden that included jackfruit and banana trees, acai palms and numerous other blooming plants, we learned that the type of mulch around a cacao tree influences the flavor of the chocolate. Citrus peels, vanilla vines and the shells of cacao

See **FRAGILE** Page 5K



Diana Lambdin Meyer/Special Contributor

**Angela Villa** grew up without chocolate, but now makes about 800 pounds of chocolate a year.

# Follow this favorite flavor from plant to plate

Continued from Page 1K

Minus the sugar, it's actually pretty close to how the ancient pre-Mesoamericans drank their kakawa.

You'll find cocoa tea at roadside stands, restaurants, resorts and the Castries market, where you can also buy cocoa sticks, solid unsweetened chocolate shaped into thick logs that locals grate into their tea. At Fond Doux, one of the oldest plantations on the island and now a luxury hotel, the tea makes an appearance every morning at breakfast. You'll also find pods throughout the lush jungle resort, as well as enormous trays of drying beans near reception. Meanwhile, Jenni Killam at Spices Cooking Studio makes a chef-driven take on a favorite: cocoa tea flan. The flan combines the usual flavors with Kahlúa and coconut milk for a creamy base that Killam tops with rum whipped cream for an afternoon buzz.

At Hotel Chocolat, though, we start with making the actual chocolate. After we tour the orchards and check out the nursery and greenhouse, where tiny cacao plants grow into sturdier trees, we head to long tables dotted with mortar-and-pestle sets.

"You have to pound the cacao nibs, like this," says Monroque, propelling nibs out of the pestle and onto the table with each blow. We pound and stir, pound and stir, approximating how traditional chocolate makers used a metate to grind the nibs into a smooth liquid. Nowadays makers use machines to grind the beans into submission. Eventually we add cocoa butter ("More!" he says, dumping extra in each of our pestles) and then sugar to taste. We skip the tempering step and pour our liquid chocolate straight into molds.

As they cool, it's time for lunch.



Photos by Jenny Sathngam/Special Contributor

**Hotel Chocolat** tour guide Cuthbert Monroque picks cacao pods for guests to see. Inside there's a white pulp that encases about 50 beans.

Everything has chocolate in it — even the hamburger, a massive beef patty with a twist of the house cocoa, Gruyère, bacon and onion confit served on a bun that is shaped like a cacao pod and contains cacao nibs. I

smear each bite in the cocoa nib vinaigrette drizzled on the plate for extra crunch, then take a big gulp of the porter made with cacao shells for understated chocolate notes. Sure, you can go for dishes like this

and the vegetable appetizer with cocoa aioli and white chocolate horseradish (both taste as strange as they sound). But the much rarer ingredient is the cocoa pulp, which tastes somewhat like a mangosteen or a lychee and absolutely nothing like chocolate. The ultraperishable ingredient is virtually nonexistent in the U.S. or really anywhere that doesn't grow cocoa on site.

Hotel Chocolat, on the other hand, uses it in everything. Brochettes of fish, chicken and veggies come marinated in the pulp before being dotted with nibs. Cacao Bellinis taste not of chocolate and cream but bright pulp with prosecco, fresh soursop juice, and lemon-verbena syrup.

But the prize is surely the Story of Chocolate in Ice, a three-part educational dessert so delicious you won't realize you're learning something new. First the cacao pulp sorbet introduces you to the plant in its absolutely raw state and also acts as a palate cleanser for the next stage, roasting. The cocoa nib ice cream represents the roasting process perfectly: It tastes more like coffee than chocolate, since the potent nibs resemble chocolate-covered espresso beans more than peanut M&M's.

Last but not least comes chocolate itself, a smooth milk chocolate ice cream sure to satisfy any sweet tooth.

But the afternoon is still just getting started. My heart racing from sugar and *Theobroma cacao*, I head to the spa for — what else — a chocolate

**If you go**  
saintlucia.now/hotelchocolat.com;  
spicescookingstudio.com

facial and massage. Hotel Chocolat doesn't just use a strong-smelling oil. Oh, no. They go for the real, messy experience. After an all-natural oatmeal cleanser, my facial begins with steam and then a cacao nib exfoliation, then moves on to a cocoa-banana-cream mask and a coconut oil massage and moisturizer.

Then it's time for the full-body experience. My masseuse slathers the cocoa-banana mousse onto my entire body and then wraps me in banana leaves towels and — let's be real here — some plastic wrap. All that's missing? An apple in my mouth and a big ol' oven. After about 15 minutes, she leads me to a shower to rinse off the wrap and come back for a gentle massage in coconut oil and ground cocoa.

"You smell like chocolate!" says Cuthbert as he hands me my homemade chocolate bar from the morning's class.

I can't imagine why. Megan Giller lives in New York and writes about food and chocolate for *Slate* and *Food & Wine*, as well as on her site *ChocolateNoise.com*

Twitter: @megangiller



The hamburger comes on a bun shaped like a cacao pod that contains cacao nibs. Try it with the house-made porter, which is made with cacao shells.



The spa at Hotel Chocolat lets you immerse yourself in chocolately relaxation with its chocolate massages, cacao nib exfoliation, facials and more.

## Fragile plants yield the stuff of chocoholics' dreams

Continued from Page 1K  
beans make a great mulch. We also learned that cacao is an "understory plant," meaning that it grows under the canopy of other trees.

"Cacao is happiest when it is surrounded by other trees," said Koa Kahili of Garden Island Chocolate. "It's a very fragile plant so companion plants are necessary to protect it from heavy wind and rain."

Although others on Kauai, such as the National Tropical Botanical Garden, offer chocolate tours, Kahili and his wife, Angela Villa, were the first on the island to grow and harvest cacao and turn it into chocolate for commercial purposes. Garden Island Chocolate produces about 800 pounds of chocolate each year.



A cacao pod on Kauai produces about 30 to 40 beans at harvest.

A pound of chocolate requires about 400 chocolate beans. There are about 30 beans per pod, and a mature, healthy tree produces about 100 pods. The cacao harvest in Hawaii is from December through February.

Garden Island Chocolate tours this time of year allow visitors to scrape the outside of the cacao pod to determine if

**If you go**  
**Garden Island Chocolate** is located on Kauai's north shore; [gardenislandchocolate.com](http://gardenislandchocolate.com) or 808-634-6812; tickets are \$65 per person. **For information** on other chocolate tours on Kauai or in Hawaii, visit [hawaii.chocolate.org](http://hawaii.chocolate.org) or [gohawaii.com](http://gohawaii.com).

it is ready for harvest and then crush the shells to reveal the beans. A mature pod, which can be red or yellow, is about the size of a football.

Acton and her husband, Dan, have another trip planned to Kauai with family. They hope to include another tour with Garden Island Chocolate. This time, she says, she'll bring a bigger bottle of wine to share.

Diana Lambdin Meyer is a freelance writer based in Parkville, Mo.



Photos by Diana Lambdin Meyer/Special Contributor

Cacao bean shells are ground up and make good mulch for cacao trees.