



selling chocolate.” As noted, the shop is a little way from the centre of town, but it is firmly established in the city’s promotional literature and foodie guides, and Edinburgh is a high-profile, world-heritage city that draws tourists – often affluent tourists – from all over the world. It is also a name that customers from overseas who may not be able to travel to Scotland can relate to, and that helps with the brand’s profile.

These days, though, Ali and Freddy have recruited a friendly team to run the shop and cafe, meaning that they can spend more time travelling the world looking for new suppliers and ideas, more time in the factory – and more time at home with their children, not far from the production base near Dunbar, 15 miles or so to the east of the capital.

In this commitment to maintaining a rewarding family lifestyle while they develop their business, Ali and Freddy have a lot in common with other artisanal chocolate makers that I encountered elsewhere in Britain – Pablo in North Wales, for example, in his farmhouse on top of the hill with children out walking the dog, and Andy and Claire Burnet in Swanage down on the Jurassic Coast in Dorset.

“Our factory is on a farm near Dunbar, and that allows us the kind of life that we want to live as a family, and to have the kind of business that we want to have,” Ali explained. “We are truly passionate about what we do – we have grown the business slowly and organically as we have brought up our family; we are not looking to exit and make big bucks. We really enjoy the process, we have a healthy routine and we get up to healthy activities as a family, Freddy and me and our two children, and I know that there are other chocolate makers who go about their lives in the same way.”

I’m not starry-eyed about such a process, and I know how hard it has been for these people to achieve as they have. But I can’t help feeling that some of the deep-seated contentment they have found rubs off on what they make. I couldn’t tell you what serenity tastes like, but I think there is some of it in a Chocolate Tree bar.

There is an ethical side to all of this as well, which has to do with peace of mind, knowing not only that what you do is in the interests of your family and those who work for you, but also that you have done the right thing in your dealings with those who grow and supply your raw materials.

A common thread among all of the chocolate makers in this book is a concern for ethical dealings with the people who grow cacao. It is easy to imagine, in a rather romantic way, that the best way to do business with a cacao grower must be to visit the plantation or smallholding, negotiate with the farmer a price for a sack of beans that is mutually agreeable, shake hands and head back to the factory to make chocolate.

The reality is different, as Ali explained: it doesn't make economic sense for a maker to incur the huge costs in time and transport involved in visiting a grower; and it doesn't make sense for the grower to waste valuable time greeting, entertaining and negotiating with each individual maker for a small quantity of beans.

Ali knows this, because he has done it. "The one time that we actually went to shake hands at the farm gate, as it were, we ended up losing money on the deal, and I believe the farmer lost money as well."

It might make for a better photo opportunity, but it doesn't make for a sustainable business – for grower or maker.

The solution? "We trade as directly as we can," Ali said. "But really I think the most important thing is to have good partners who have good relationships with the growers and can help them to understand what we need. It's great to go and meet the people involved and we love to do that. But the truth is that we don't have the scale to fill up a container [to go on an ocean-going ship] with beans just for ourselves."

Instead, Chocolate Tree, like other relatively small-scale producers, works with carefully selected, ethically engaged partners, such as Uncommon Cacao and Original Beans, who can work with farmers to ensure high standards of growth and fermentation, and who can buy in sufficient quantities to allow economies of scale in transportation – that is, fill up a container.



But Ali and Freddy still feel that they are on the side of people working on a human scale. "It's good to know that we are working with smallholders," Ali said. "With people who have a couple of hectares and a community of families, all being supported by the way that we're making chocolate."

As for a favourite cocoa-growing region, that's not easy for Ali to choose. "My favourite origin? Wow, that's tricky – there are so many that I love." A bit of thought and a lot of coaxing produces a vote for Mexico: "I love the country, the culture, the cuisine..." But hang on: "They're not actually my favourite beans."

"I love Chililique from Piura in Peru – those beans have the best flavour, they are super-fruity, a little bit like Madagascar." At the Chocolate Tree, they use their bars made with Chililique cacao to 'convert' customers who are new to single-origin bean-to-bar chocolate: "You know, when you get that 'Wow, so that's proper chocolate' moment..."

Ali loves Belize, too. "That's such a wacky place, such a mix ethnographically and demographically, and that really comes through in the cacao..." And of course, Freddy has her own views.





And a vital role in the business. “Being a husband-and-wife team is integral to what we do; we both bring our best to the business,” Ali told me. “Freddy designs all our wonderful packaging, and she is a mathematician so she is great at bringing technical input and somehow converting it into works of art.”

As well as close family and supplier relationships, there is another bond that helps to keep the Chocolate Tree growing gently and fruitfully. “We still have a really close relationship with our audience,” Ali said. “That’s so important. Unless you have that contact you are just a brand...”

Heading out of Edinburgh laden down with Chocolate Tree’s lovely bars, I had a choice: north into the mountains, or over to the wild west. With half an eye on the forecast (set reasonably fair for Scotland), I shifted my focus to the west coast, and a chocolatier with a passion for her local ingredients, a remarkable background, and an unusual sideline.

You’ll have gathered by now that the business of artisanal chocolate making attracts some interesting and forthright characters, and Melanie Neil of CocoaMo chocolate in the little town of Helensburgh certainly ticks those boxes.

CocoaMo is in this book to represent Britain’s many individual chocolate makers who work on a small scale in modest premises but do not compromise on taste or quality. I know that there are a good few such makers out there and I would have loved to have included more than space would allow – so look around in your own area and if you hear of an artisan chocolatier operating in the right spirit and the right way on this sort of scale, do give their products a try – you may well unearth a gem, and you are sure to make a friend.

Melanie’s background would not immediately suggest a career in fine chocolate. Both her parents were in the emergency services (father a firefighter, mother a nurse), and the first phase of Melanie’s professional life followed that kind of an arc, with a decade as an army medic followed by a stint with the NHS in Scotland. She retired from the NHS at the age of 39 to pursue a new path, one that she told me represented “more of a passion than a career change”.

She wanted to learn to make top-quality chocolate, and found an excellent tutor in Ruth Hinks, of Cocoa Black chocolate and pastry school in Peebles, Scotland,