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What's Old is New (Regarding Chocolate)

March 7, 2016 | Mike Madaio | Sicily | 1 Comment

It was a Thursday evening, before dinner; I was browsing the aisles of Carlino's, an excellent Italian food market in the Philadelphia suburbs, shopping while hungry. Never a good idea, but especially dangerous in a place like this, rife with amazing cheeses, hand-made pastas and artisanal goodies. While scanning the package of some overpriced, **hipster chocolate bar** – in this case, laced with black truffles – a friendly employee interrupted me.

“If you like chocolate,” she said, handing me a bar of *cioccolato alla cannella* from Sicily's **Antica Dolceria Bonajuto**, “this is the one you need to try. It's produced using an ancient method, passed down from the Aztecs.” As much as I love black truffles, I was sold. She had me at Aztecs.

As it turns out, when the Spanish imported chocolate to Sicily in the 1500s, they also brought the metate, a type of mortar for grinding and mixing cocoa employed by the bygone inhabitants of Mexico. And though this technique has been mostly forgotten across the globe, it has endured in the Sicilian city of Modica, especially at Bonajuto, the island's oldest confectionary, a family run business since 1880.

Though Bonajuto does not use a metate, they do forgo the modern technique of conching – a refining process used in most chocolate production – instead mixing the cocoa with castor sugar and spices, keeping the temperature below 45C so the sugar crystals don't melt. The ensuing result almost recalls a Nestle Crunch bar, yet is denser in both structure and taste. (And much better, obviously.)

“Bonajuto has used the same technique since its inception,” Nick Carlinio, the eponymous Italian Market’s CMO, tells me when I inquire about the bars. (He’s visited the factory too.) “And since the beans are ground to a granular consistency, the chocolate has a natural crunchy texture and great rich flavor. It’s unlike other chocolate.”



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Limiting the ingredients to ground cocoa seeds and sugar – no vegetable fats, milk

derivatives or lecithin are added – preserves the pure, natural cocoa essence. To further intrigue taste buds, recipes feature traditional Aztec spices such as cinnamon, vanilla or chilies, infusing subtle notes of warmth and piquancy.

But the company is not content to rely on the past for success. They've more recently introduced a collection of bars that feature new and different flavors, such as cardamom, nutmeg or marjoram. Still, from this author's perspective, cinnamon is the place to start. Carlino agrees, calling it "addicting".



We also agree on the sea salt chocolate bar, which adds crunchy wisps of savory goodness to the already rich chocolate, as well as the nutmeg, which is a bit over the top. (I love nutmeg, but here it overpowers the cocoa.)

What's perhaps most interesting about the Bonajuto bars is how they stand out in the increasingly-crowded fair-trade, stone-ground, bean-to-bar market. Infusing wacky ingredients – truffles, bacon, even wine and beer – doesn't trump the uniqueness of the method itself. "Once our customers try a Bonajuto chocolate bar," says Carlino, "they fall in love and keep coming back for more."

I guess there's a reason the recipe has endured for nearly 3000 years.

Buy Bonajuto chocolate:

- *Carlino's Market* in Ardmore, PA and West Chester, PA
- Online from *Zingerman's*

Mi piace 236

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Mr.Loto

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Interesting, I live in Italy but I didn't know these news. Thanks 😊

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