



Cocoa High

Chocolate Concierge makes its chocolate bars entirely in Malaysia

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To call Ong Ning Geng a chocolate enthusiast is an understatement. As the founder of Chocolate Concierge, he lives and breathes all things chocolate. But what sets his chocolates apart is the fact that some of them are made in Malaysia – even the cacao beans are sourced in this country!

Ong graciously obliges us with a visit to his cacao farm near Raub in Pahang. After a two-hour drive from Kuala Lumpur, we arrive at the farm located at the foot of Fraser’s Hill. Ong purchased this 4.04 ha land last year in order to have better control of the cacao beans. The trees require two years to mature – Ong still has to wait another year before they can be harvested to make chocolates.

Meantime, he gets his beans from the Orang Asli villages in the same area. Ong worked out a deal with the villagers to purchase either the entire fruits or the wet beans from the pods at a fair price. They are currently used to make two chocolate bars, the Temuan and the Semai.

“I decided to name them after the Orang Asli tribes who grew the cacao trees as a tribute to them. I think the quality of the chocolates is of international standard. And it’s even more meaningful that they are made from scratch here in Malaysia,” he muses.

Ong’s journey began in 2008 when he returned from the US after completing two Bachelor’s degrees in Physics and Computer Science. His passion and love for chocolates soon led him to purchase

several cacao trees from the Malaysian Cocoa board to do his own research.

“I attended a number of planting courses held by the Malaysian Cocoa Board,” he says. “I wanted to know more about cacao farming here and see if there was a way I could make my own chocolates.”

But that plan fell through when he discovered that the quality of their chocolates was not up to his standard. “I wanted a level of quality that was comparable to fine chocolates. I wasn’t willing to do something that wouldn’t allow me to achieve my goal.”

In his pursuit for chocolate perfection, he visited farms in Vietnam and Switzerland – it was at the latter that he discovered Felchlin, a Swiss craft chocolate manufacturer. He purchased chocolate blocks and coins from Felchlin to make bonbons, pralines and brittles, and sell them here via his own company, Chocolate Concierge, in 2015. Chocolate Concierge is currently only available at Jason’s Food Hall in Bangsar Shopping Centre.

Although business was growing, he was getting restless about realising his dream of wholly made-in-Malaysia chocolates. And that was how he ended up buying the farm in Pahang and trading with the Orang Asli.

Back at the farm, Ong explains the process of chocolate making. The wet beans are transferred to a wooden crate for fermentation, a process that takes six days. During fermentation, the beans are tossed a number of times. After six days, they are taken out of the crate and laid out on a rack to dry under the sun in a greenhouse.

The dried beans are then transferred to his factory in Taman Bukit Maluri in Kepong, where they are cleaned, sorted and roasted. The roasted beans are cracked open to separate the husks from the nibs, and then put through a stone mill to be grounded. Sugar and cocoa butter are added, and the mixture is left to aerate for 48 hours. A team of chocolatiers then comes in to temper and mould the mixture into delicious chocolate bars.

For now, the bars are the only chocolates made entirely locally but Ong has plans to produce enough of his own cacao beans to make other types of chocolates. “Malaysia has great cocoa quality potential. If you taste our chocolate bars, you cannot tell the difference from the ones made overseas. When my customers discover that they are made from local beans, they often say that they never knew that Malaysian beans could be this good.”

“Chocolate is such a unique gift,” Ong enthuses. “It’s the only gift you can buy ahead of time and you can give it to anyone, no matter their age or their relation to you. No one rejects the offer of chocolates.”

Spoken like a true chocolate lover. □

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The Temuan and Semai chocolate bars are made from locally sourced beans

Ong is on a mission to present Malaysia-made chocolates to the world

Cacao tree saplings growing on the farm

The drying process is done naturally in a drying station bathed in sunlight

PHOTOS BY DD HOE

