

Don't scarf the chocolate

“Eating it takes you on a journey,” promised chocolate-maker Dale Montondo as I raised the cinnamon and cayenne pepper-infused chocolate to my mouth.

But wait—I was at *tōcōti* (pronounced TOE-koe-tee), a tiny Rochester chocolate manufacturer riding the early wave of the bean-to-bar crafting trend. Instead of scarfing it down, *tōcōti* taste master Ellen Montondo suggested I break off a tiny piece and rub it between my fingers, then place it on my tongue. When I did, the morsel blossomed into a cinnamon zing. After a few seconds the chile erupted, its heat balanced by the chocolate's rich earthiness.

The journey of eating these delicacies was certainly an easier one than the journey making them. Montondo had been on a quest ever since his taste-master wife, Ellen—a lover of dark chocolate—quit traveling to Europe on business in 2008, ending her practice of stuffing premium chocolates in her suitcase.

Generally, chocolatiers buy already-made bulk chocolate as a raw ingredient. But after researching, Dale set out to make chocolate straight from the cocoa bean. Cracking and sorting the beans by hand in his Walworth home, Dale began producing small batches of chocolate by trial and error, roasting in small 40-pound batches for at least 32 hours in his commercial kitchen. By adjusting his roasting technique, Dale can emphasize nuances in the beans' flavors to produce distinctive single-origin and specialty bars.

Three years ago, the Montondos launched *tōcōti* to share the wealth. Ellen devised the name from three terms used for drumming rhythms by the Aztecs—which should make customers feel special, considering the Aztecs used chocolate as offerings to the gods.

Tōcōti chocolate is available in Fairport at the Casa Larga Gift Shop and Moonlight Creamery, in Pittsford at the Cocoa Bean Shoppe and the Village Bakery, in Naples at Monica's Pies and online at shop.tocoti.com.

But wait—what about those moments of craving a beverage to go with the sweets? The seemingly eternal interest in wine and chocolate tastings has led Alex Vigneri, CEO of Vigneri Chocolates in Rochester, to pair and package chocolate to complement wine purchases. The product, which he dubbed Quarrels, launched in February.

Quarrels is a self-contained tasting kit with bite-size chocolate drops in three bodies comparable to wine: light, medium and full. The name is meant to be playful: “We created chocolate to be experienced with wine, not quarrel with it,” Vigneri explained.

“How you pair wine is based on cocoa content,” continued Vigneri, whose goal is to sell Quarrels in gift shops, grocery stores, liquor stores and convenience stores in the U.S. and Europe. “Fuller bodies of chocolate have a higher cocoa



IMAGE COURTESY OF TŌCŌTI

The chocolate from *tōcōti* follows the trend of small-batch crafting from bean to bar.

percentage of 70. Lighter bodies have a lower cocoa percentage of 34.”

As precise as that sounds, dessert and drinking aren't necessarily for rule followers. When I looked at the handy chocolate wheel on the package, I saw that a pinot noir fan like me should go with the medium-body chocolate. “But I like dark chocolate,” I protested.

“It doesn't really matter,” answered Vigneri. “We're not here to quarrel. We're here to enjoy and mix it up. It's whatever you want.”

Vigneri has set out to understand what people want from their chocolate, especially women. “When the economy is down, chocolate sales go up because it's a safe commodity,” said Vigneri. “It's the lipstick factor,” he said, referring to a 2010 nationwide survey by Lindt Chocolate: two out of three women said that choosing chocolate is a personal decision akin to choosing a lipstick. And both amount to a small, safe luxury. “Our strategy is to be an affordable luxury.”

Vigneri has grown the family chocolate business into an inventive company that aims to launch a dozen new products this year, including the patent-pending Doodle Egg—the world's first chocolate egg-decorating kit. (Think a big and hollow, egg-shaped M&M with a white candy shell as the blank slate.)

For more information, visit vigneri.com. **R**

—Kristine Bruneau