

## LIFE

# Chocolate hits the spot on Valentine's Day in Thailand

Cultural change has triggered a surge in the consumption of cocoa products



Rawisara "Irin" La-onsri, daughter of MarkRin Chocolate founder Sanh La-onsri, is pictured amid racks of drying cocoa beans at the company's plantation in the northern Thai province of Chiang Mai. (All photos by Ron Emmons)

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Like Charlie in the chocolate factory, I have often dreamed of devouring huge quantities of this seductive substance, which must be one of the most popular tastes on our planet. I mean, who doesn't like chocolate?

So, imagine my excitement when a friend invited me to visit a cocoa farm and chocolate showroom near my home in northern Thailand to find out how the oval pods growing on ordinary-looking trees are transformed into the yummy form of chocolate. Not only would I get to learn more about my favorite food, but I would also have the chance to buy a scrumptious Valentine's Day gift for my girlfriend.

Although Valentine's Day (Feb. 14) has been celebrated as a festival of romance since the 15th century, the connection with chocolate started only in 1868, in the U.K., when the confectionery manufacturer Cadbury began to sell heart-shaped boxes of chocolates as gifts.

The company's marketing gambit was a huge success, and giving chocolates for Valentine's Day is now a global phenomenon, though there are variations in customs between countries. In Japan, for example, women give chocolates to men -- a tradition that began in the 1950s. Japanese men are expected to return the favor on White Day (March 14).

Unlike in other countries, Japan's chocolate giving falls into two categories -- *giri-choko* (obligation chocolates) and *honmei-choko* (true-love chocolates), which can lead to unfortunate misunderstandings. (The former are usually given to coworkers and acquaintances, the latter to romantic partners.)



A cacao tree can produce up to 100,000 flowers, but fewer than 1% mature into pods.

My friend Mike Barraclough introduced me to Rawisara La-onsri, usually known as Irin, at the shop and showroom of Thailand's oldest chocolate factory, MarkRin Chocolate, where a wonderful fragrance hung in the air. Founded in 2010, the business is located in San Sai, northeast of Chiang Mai's city center.

Before visiting their farm in San Patong, about 30 kilometers south of the city, she invited us to taste a few of their products. We nibbled on dark chocolate, milk chocolate, white chocolate and chocolate dewdrops, and then sipped a creamy cup of cocoa made from organic cocoa powder.

Irin showed us the source of the mouthwatering aroma -- a machine that was churning cocoa beans into a smooth paste in a corner of the showroom. Then she introduced us to her father, Sanh La-onsri, a former professor at Thailand's Maejo University and an expert on beverage plants, adding that he had introduced the country's first locally made chocolate brand, named after Irin and her brother Mark.



Sanh La-onsri and his daughter Irin at the cocoa farm.

I reflected on how fast cultural habits can change, since only a few decades ago most Thais did not eat chocolate or drink hot beverages such as tea, coffee or cocoa, let alone grow the raw materials. These days they are avid consumers of all these products and produce award-winning crops of each plant.

Sanh La-onsri said that after years of extensive research, he had successfully created a new strain of the cacao plant -- the source for both cocoa and cacao products -- which is a cross between the Imperial College Selection variety and a hybrid of the Forastero and Criollo plants. The new strain, named Irin Mark One, is said to combine rapid growth with high yields and drought resistance.

At MarkRin Farm, Irin showed us rows of seedlings being prepared for planting, many of which still had bean husks clinging to their stems. "Most chocolate manufacturers buy their beans from farmers and advertise their product as being 'from bean to bar,'" she explained. "Here at MarkRin, we control the whole process, so we can proudly claim our product to be 'from seedling to chocolate.'"

Her father became animated as he walked us around the plantation, surprising us with some startling facts. "Our trees only take three years to start producing fruit," he began, "and each tree can produce up to 100,000 flowers." He pointed at the delicate white and pink flowers emerging from the stem. "Less than 1% of those flowers develop into cocoa pods, but that still brings a big harvest."



Samples of MarkRin products. Founded in 2010, the business is located in San Sai, northeast of central Chiang Mai city.

I marveled over these pods, shaped like miniature rugby balls, which were growing from the trees' trunks and branches. Some were green, some red and others orange-yellow, signifying that they were ripe. "We put straw and leaves around the base of the trees," he went on, "to protect the roots from extremes of temperature. We also shelter the plants with this covering to protect them from direct sunlight," he said, pointing to a light plastic gauze stretched above the trees.

In a corner of the plantation, we came across workers hacking pods open with machetes to reveal clusters of beans wrapped in white mucilage, a thick gluey substance produced by many plants. "Each pod contains around 20 to 40 beans," Sanh La-onsri said, "which are then wrapped in banana leaves and left to ferment. This is the most important part of the process as it brings out the delicate scent of chocolate. After that, the beans are dried in the sun."

We entered a sheltered area where waist-high racks were covered with brown beans. Irin ran her hands over them to check their moisture levels and handed me a bean to sniff its aroma. Sure enough, the distinctive fragrance of chocolate was noticeable.



A worker shells cocoa pods at the plantation.

Once the beans are dried, they need to be graded and cleaned, roasted, cracked and winnowed, ground, beaten in a conching machine (unique to chocolate production), tempered (another complex process), and finally molded into bars or individual chocolates. How this process became refined through the ages is one of the marvels of mankind.

Sanh La-onsri took us on to look at a huge pit where the discarded pods are deposited to produce compost. "Our chocolate is 100% organic since we use no chemical pesticides or fertilizers, and we also produce zero waste, making the cocoa-growing process environmentally friendly and sustainable," he said with a hint of pride.

Our farm tour over, we headed back to the shop, where I bought a selection of chocolates for my sweetheart. On the way home I smiled in anticipation of the delight on my girlfriend's face when I gave her this luscious treat.

*Ron Emmons is a contributing writer.*

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