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Setting The Chocolate Bars High

By STEVE MOLLMAN Thursday, Oct. 28, 2010

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Full of beans Monggo products use local cocoa and target domestic customers
Courtesy of Chocolate Monggo



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Finding a good cup of java in Indonesia has always been easy, but a decent bar of chocolate? That's another story — never mind that the nation is a major exporter of cocoa beans. Just ask Thierry Detournay, the Belgian founder of Chocolate Monggo, chocolatemonggo.com.

"Making chocolate is a very long process," says Detournay. And that about sums up his own slow drift into the trade. He moved to Java's cultural capital Yogyakarta about 10 years ago as a drifter, then embarked on stints as a social worker and French lecturer. But he was so aghast at the quality of local chocolates — and the dearth of decent imported ones — that he began making his own at home out of desperation.

Friends encouraged him to sell them, and soon he was seen around town displaying his instantly popular treats on a pink Vespa that doubled as a sales booth. After a few starts and stops, in 2005 he founded what is today Chocolate Monggo with a team of three. The company now employs around 80 workers and its products are found in over 400 outlets in Java and Bali. It uses only properly fermented, high-quality beans from Sumatra and Java, and real cocoa butter rather than vegetable or palm oil or some other cheap substitute. There are around 10 flavors, such as cashew-nut praline and ginger, with mango and a tongue-blistering chili in the works.
(See 25 authentic Asian experiences.)

Detournay eventually plans to expand into overseas markets but for now he is more interested in dispelling the notion that high-quality products made in Indonesia are only for export. There's certainly lots of room for growth in the local market — according to Euromonitor, in 2009 the per capita chocolate consumption in Indonesia was just 0.3 kg, compared with a whopping 11.6 kg in the U.K. With an eye toward attracting local shoppers, Monggo's recycled-paper packaging is adorned with Javanese motifs. At the same time, the brand's local identity has made it attractive to tourists in search of a tasty and tasteful memento. Tour operators now include the Monggo workshop as a stop on tours of Kota Gede — the Yogyakarta neighborhood traditionally known for its silver workshops and picturesque old buildings. Visitors watch through a glass divider as workers wearing masks, caps and gloves inject chocolate shells with praline paste or noisily pound trays of recently poured chocolate to remove air bubbles. ("We don't sell air, we sell chocolate," explains Detournay.) Then everyone rushes to buy a souvenir bar fresh from the workshop.

If you can't make it to Yogyakarta, the best place to find the full range of Monggo bars is in Jakarta at the Kem Chicks gourmet supermarket in the ritzy Pacific Place mall, next to the stock exchange. But it's increasingly common to see at least one or two Monggo varieties in cafés, bakeries and even convenience stores. Detournay seems determined to salvage the reputation of Indonesian chocolate, one outlet at a time.

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