



## PAUL DE BONDT PISA

TWENTY YEARS AGO,' says Dutchman Paul De Bondt, 'there were only three types of chocolate here: plain, milk and white. No one thought about doing anything else.' De Bondt moved to Tuscany in the early 1990s, where he met designer Cecilia Iacobelli. A pastry chef in the Netherlands, he found that Tuscany, with its lack of tradition, offered much more creative potential and he and Iacobelli saw a gap in the market for 'contemporary Italian chocolate'. Their philosophy from the outset was to keep both product and packaging simple, and in their stylish shop on the bank of the River Arno, the chocolate is king, uncluttered by fussy wrappings.

De Bondt has won 'an embarrassing number' of prizes for his perfectly balanced aromatic bars, for which he pairs different types of chocolate with salt flakes, chillies, rose petals and so on. My personal favourite is the De Bondt Ryé praline, filled with figs and almonds ground with Passito di Pantelleria. *Paul De Bondt: Lungarno Pacinotti 5, Pisa (00 39 50 779042; www.debondt.it)*

crystallising sage, rosemary and wild fennel before encasing them in 70 per cent fondant chocolate to form slim, square 'cretti'. Since then, his flavours have expanded to include citrus fruits, ginger, green pepper, chilli, Chianti, liquorice, toasted millet and even capers, the latter crushed into a meringue and encased in dark chocolate.

La Molina's main outlet is Il Rosso e il Nero café, east of Pistoia, where you can buy the full range of bars, pralines, *cretti* and 'Fringes', the result of a collaboration with New York artist Rita Lintz.

*Il Rosso e il Nero, Via Montalese 9, Santomato di Pistoia (00 39 573 774379; www.lamolina.it)*



► chocolate fondue plus his superb cake. His secret? 'An irresponsible passion for my work.' *Workshop and shop: Via de' Macci 50 (00 39 55 2001609). Café and shop: Via V Gioberti 61 (00 39 55 664858; www.andreabianchini.net).*

## LA MOLINA PISTOIA

THE MOST STRIKING thing about La Molina chocolate is its funky packaging by artist and graphic designer Riccardo Fattori, whose creative partnership with the Lunardi brothers (chocolatier and pastry chef) dates from 2002. What's inside the packaging doesn't disappoint either. 'For me, chocolate is a celebration,' says Riccardo Lunardi, who started making chocolates with a distinctive Tuscan quality: caramelising and then

*Right: pralines by Paul De Bondt. Above, clockwise: La Molina pralines; designs by Riccardo Fattori; the Lunardi brothers and Riccardo Fattori at La Molina, Pistoia*

‘In Paul De Bondt's stylish shop on the bank of the River Arno, the chocolate is king, uncluttered by fussy wrappings’



## AMEDEI LA ROTTA, PONTEDERA

NO ROUND UP of Tuscany's *cioccolatieri* would be complete without Amedei. The only chocolate maker in the region to follow the process 'from bean to bar' works from a former iron foundry near Pontedera, now painted with images of cocoa beans. When we met, the formidable Cecilia Tessieri, maître chocolatier, company founder and boss, was quick to point out that her personal involvement begins with the cocoa suppliers (she also owns ►



‘Down in the busy café, shelves and counters are stocked with Slitti’s trademark coffee spoons and chocolate tools, pralines and dragées’

no retail outlet, but Amedei chocolate is available in the best gourmet shops and cafés, and you can book a tour and tasting (after which you won’t be able to resist buying).

*Amedei, via San Gervasio 29, La Rotta, Pontedera (00 39 587 484849; [www.amedei.com](http://www.amedei.com))*

### ANDREA SLITTI MONSUMMANO TERME

Andrea Slitti’s elegant café/shop is on the outskirts of the small spa town of Monsummano Terme. Born into a family of coffee roasters, Slitti started making chocolate to complement the coffee and now produces some 100 tons a year, exporting worldwide. When we met earlier this year, virtually every surface in his office was covered in magnificent, sculptural Easter Egg creations. A

true perfectionist, Slitti told me he aspires to a ‘clean taste’ in his chocolates so only uses top-quality, natural ingredients, eliminating butter and cream from his pralines ‘to get straight to the essence of the flavour’.

Down in the buzzy café, where ladies sip *cioccolato caldo*, the shelves and counters are stocked with his trademark coffee spoons and chocolate tools, pralines and dragées, chocolate spreads, and bars of award-winning Lattenero milk chocolate. About to move into larger, eco-friendly premises round the corner (where there will also be a visitor centre), Slitti still considers himself an artisan: ‘There’s a person at the heart of it all,’ he says. *Slitti Cioccolato e Caffè, via Francesca Sud 1268, Monsummano Terme (00 39 572 640240; [www.slitti.it](http://www.slitti.it))*



► a plantation in a remote corner of Venezuela) from where only the best quality beans (mostly Criollo and Trinitario) find their way to La Rotta. Beneath us, machines were toasting, crushing, conching and tempering, turning out the smoothest chocolate imaginable.

Amedei forgoes wacky experimentation in favour of classic, clearly labelled bars such as the award-winning Toscano Black 63% and No 9 (a blend of cocoa from nine different plantations), the single-origin Neapolitans (Grenada, Madagascar, Jamaica etc) and perfectly judged pralines. There is

*Clockwise from above: Cecilia Tessieri, owner of Amedei; a range of classic bars from Amedei; preparing pralines at Andrea Slitti’s workshop, Monsummano Terme; Slitti’s chocolate spoons*

### TUSCANY: ON THE COCOA TRAIL

**GETTING THERE**  
The nearest airport is in Pisa. EasyJet ([www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com)), Ryanair ([www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)) and Jet2 ([www.jet2.com](http://www.jet2.com)) all have flights there from various London and regional airports.

**Journey time**  
2 hours, 10 minutes from London

**WEATHER TO GO**  
Visit in spring, when the weather is warm but won’t melt your chocolate