

LIFESTYLE

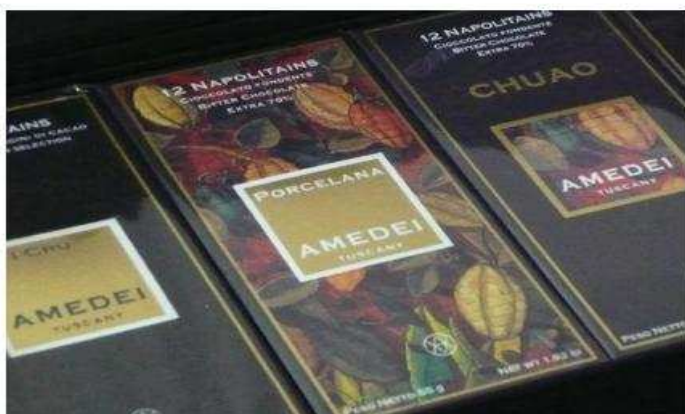
In Search of the World's Best Chocolate

Chocolate is one of my favourite foods.

It is made from the seeds of the cocoa (a.k.a. cacao) bean and its scientific name, theobroma cacao, actually means "food of the gods". Given its pleasant taste, mood-enhancing properties, reputed health benefits (e.g. anticarcinogenic, antidiarrhoeal and antioxidant) and alleged aphrodisiac qualities, it is no wonder that chocolate is one of the most popular foods around.

There are many stories involving chocolate and they include Road Dahl's famous Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Joanne Harris's Chocolat and Laura Esquivel's Como agua para chocolate (Like Water for Chocolate). My favourite chocolate story, however, is a true one and involves French real estate law and a French Notary Public named Andre-Francois Raffray.

In 1965, when he was 47 years old, Monsieur Raffray bought an apartment in Arles, in the south of France, en viager from a Madame Jeanne Calment for about 2,500 francs (around S\$750) monthly. Under French law, that meant he had to pay her 2,500 francs monthly for the rest of her life but he would get to keep the apartment on her death regardless of how much he had paid - in a kind of reverse mortgage. I read that these transactions must involve an element of chance (or *aléa* in French) and they are contained in that part of the French Civil Code that covers contracts of chance together with insurance and gaming contracts.



Anyway, at the time of Monsieur Raffray's purchase, the apartment was worth about 10 years of monthly payments. Since Madame Calment was then 90 years old, it seemed like a good bargain to him. However, when Mr Raffray died 30 years later in 1995, Madame Calment was still alive and holding the record as the world's oldest living person in the Guinness Book of World Records. She eventually died in 1997 at the age of 122 and was reported to attribute her longevity to a few things. One of them was about two pounds of chocolate - a week!

Like many people, I started with a preference for milk chocolate (although arguably, it does not contain enough cacao to be truly considered as chocolate) before going over to the dark side. I like dark chocolate in most of its reincarnations including chocolate cake, chocolate chip cookies, hot chocolate and chocolate ice cream. I probably draw the line when it comes to chocolate-coated insects, though. But chocolate in bars is really the best way to eat it and to judge it. Just as I would like to eat the best chicken rice, I would also like to eat the best chocolate. Unfortunately, there are many more chocolate makers than there are chicken rice cooks and good chocolate usually costs much more since they are normally imported. Be that as it may, over

the years I have tried chocolate from many different makers including Ghirardelli (from the United States), Cote d'Or (from Belgium), Cadbury (from England), Van Houten (from the Netherlands), Lindt (from Switzerland), Valrhona (from France) and Royce (from Japan).

My research into the best chocolate led me to Amedei from Italy. They are highly regarded chocolate makers who also make Amedei Porcelana, one of the most expensive chocolates in the world. This is because it is made from one of the rarest and supposedly the most genetically pure cocoa beans around. My one prior taste of an Amedei napolitain chocolate (it was an intensely rich and surprisingly smooth tasting dark chocolate wafer) at the end of a meal in a leading restaurant secured its position in my view as a superb chocolate. The use of Amedei chocolates by, among others, leading pâtissier Pierre Hermé and leading chefs Ferran Adrià and Thomas Keller also helped. So did a number of articles about them winning numerous awards from the Academy of Chocolate annually from 2006 to 2008 including the one that matters the most - the "Golden Bean" for the best bean to bar chocolate.

The Academy's jury comprised over 30 international chocolate experts so it was quite a significant achievement. To say that Amedei is just a chocolate would be a bit like saying that Picasso is just a painter.

There is actually an interesting story in the history of Amedei's success that appeared in an article by Pete Wells in the Food and Wine magazine in May 2006. He wrote that Alessio and Cecilia Tessieri, the brother and sister team behind Amedei visited Valrhona (whom they admired) in France in 1991. They wanted to negotiate a deal for their chocolate supply for making pralines (i.e. filled chocolates), since the siblings were originally candy makers.

However, they were told that Italy was not evolved enough to appreciate such extraordinary chocolate. That insult led to their resolve to become chocolate makers instead, and to be better than Valrhona, then acknowledged by many as the best chocolate maker in the world. Eventually, the siblings even took over Valrhona's entire supply of chocolate from the renowned Chuao region of Venezuela in a shrewd move. It involved bypassing brokers and agreeing to pay the cacao farmers' debts and also offering to pay much more than what Valrhona had been paying for the cacao beans.

Unfortunately, I have never seen Amedei chocolates sold in any of the chocolate shops I visited. One slow day, I decided to do a little research and managed to find the contact details of Amedei and wrote to them asking how I could get their chocolates in Singapore. I received a warm response putting me in touch with their regional distributor saying:

Thank you for your interest in our chocolate. It's nice to hear that you wish to experience your delight and enthusiasm for Amedei.

Our product is an expression of the passion, culture and exceptional quality that Amedei is committed to. The effect on the palate while tasting our chocolate transmits our emotions in a complex inventory of flavours and fragrances, evoking the history of the chocolate, the exotic nature of the cocoa's place of origin, the childhood sentiments that only chocolate can recall.

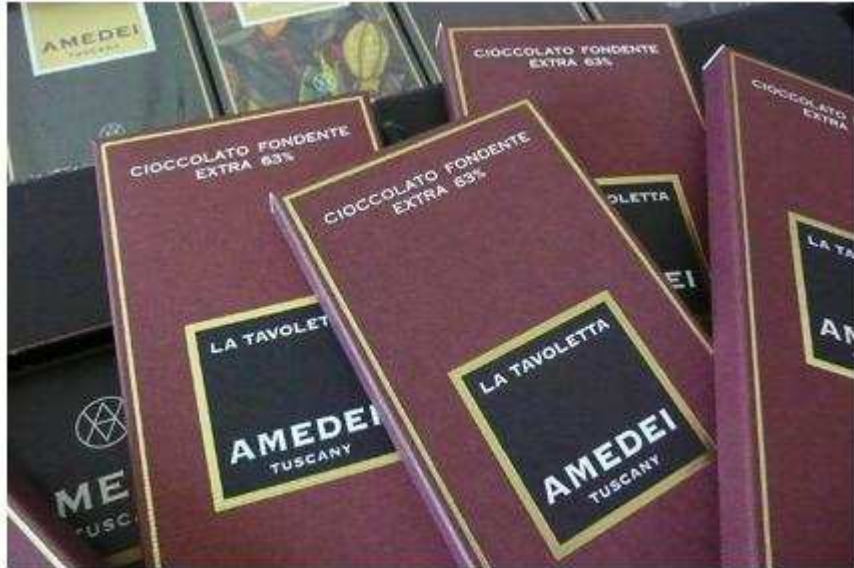
Please find below the coordinates of our distributor.

Before I could follow up with their distributor, Roberto Albreschi, the operations Manager of Amedei's sole distributor in South-East Asia contacted me and gave me a list of some places in Singapore where Amedei's chocolates may be bought.

It included The Chocolatier at basement 2 of Takashimaya Department Store at 391 Orchard Road and Jones the Grocer at Block 9, #01-12 Dempsey Road. In addition, he invited me to view the Amedei collection of chocolates at their office. Curious to see the widest range of Amedei chocolates (since the other

places only carried selected items), I took up his offer and arranged to meet Roberto in their Singapore office in, of all places, an industrial estate in the MacPherson Road area. To my delight, Roberto not only showed me all the Amedei chocolates they had but also offered me a tasting of some of them together with a potent cup of espresso. He explained each chocolate as I tried it and the entire experience was quite interesting and educational. During the tasting, he also described his previous visit to Amedei's factory near Pisa in the Tuscany region of Italy and the care that was taken in producing Amedei chocolates.

The powerful combination of chocolate and coffee must have had some effect on me as I ended up buying quite a lot of Amedei chocolates (including more than a kilogram of Amedei's Toscano Black 63% bars - the 2007 Golden Bean award winner) from Roberto for a not very insubstantial sum. However, he softened the blow by giving me a free bar of Amedei's Toscano Brown.



[Note: Shortly after I finished writing this article in February 2009, the Academy of Chocolate announced their winners for 2009 and Amedei again won many awards, including the top award of the Golden Bean.]

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