The Craft of Chocolate

April 2017

SIMRAN SETHI INTERVIEWS WITH:
Clay Gordon, author of *Discover Chocolate*, and creator and moderator of TheChocolateLife.com
Karen Bryant, executive director of the Fine Chocolate Industry Association
Sunita de Tourreil, founder of The Chocolate Garage
Carla Martin, founder and executive director of the Fine Cacao and Chocolate Institute
Greg D'Alesandre, chocolate sourcerer at Dandelion Chocolate
Art Pollard, founder and head chocolate maker at Amano Artisan Chocolate

---

Clay Gordon

Author, *Discover Chocolate*
Creator and Moderator, TheChocolateLife.com

Clay Gordon: My name is Clay Gordon. I am the creator and moderator of a community called TheChocolateLife.com. I am the author of a book called *Discover Chocolate*. I have been following my own path in chocolate for the past 20 years now and have been dedicated—for the last 15 or more—to helping people appreciate fine chocolate.

Simran Sethi: When we speak about fine chocolate, how do you define it?

CG: Oh my gosh, it's many things. I put it in my mouth, and I recognize it. And a lot of it is personal. I try to resist this idea that fine chocolate is only made from small producers, or fine chocolate is only made from heirloom cacao beans—or any kind of differentiation that puts somebody else in control of my tasting experience. I may have grown up in England, and my childhood is based on Cadbury Dairy Milk. And so, in many respects, that is what is good for me.

SS: I love that.

CG: That's what fine chocolate means for me. I mean, in the end, it's just chocolate. It's all about this thing that I put in my mouth that brings me pleasure, and fine chocolate brings me pleasure.

SS: That's fantastic. We have both, in our own ways, written about what it means to be your own expert when eating chocolate. Tell me more about what that means to you.

CG: When I started off being a chocolate critic, it was all about me. It was all about my interpretation. Here's a chocolate, based on my experience and my training. And most people who are in the chocolate tasting business, are, in fact, self-trained.

It was based on eating lots and lots of chocolate and thinking about the experience. "This chocolate is a good chocolate," based on my definition of what good means. So it's a good flavor; it's a good texture; it's well-made. You know, any number of factors go into that definition. But, in the end, it was about me.

It was about my taste, and my taste is not universal. I grew up in the United States. I have a fairly broad interest in food, and so I'm open to lots of different flavors. I mean, if you grow up in other cultures, you may not be exposed to some flavors and so what's good for you is not necessarily the same thing as what's good for me.

I did an about-face about 10 years ago when I started talking to people about chocolate. Rather than this being about me—"Oh, this chocolate's good. Oh, these two chocolates, see how they go with each other, and this one is better than the other one."—it turned into helping people understand why they like what they like. What is it about the chocolate that they're eating that appeals to them, right? Or doesn't appeal to them. Because, in the end, it's what goes in their mouth that counts, not what goes in my mouth.

SS: What your perspective brings up for me is this idea that this is actually available to everyone. There seems to be this idea in the world that things that are focused on craft or quality—or any food that is artisanal in nature—now lives in the realm of foodies. But what you're really saying is this belongs to all of us.

CG: Oh, absolutely. I mean, I have to go back to my early art philosophy training, John Dewey's *Art as Experience*, where what the art is within the person who makes it, the art, and the person who experiences it. The object itself has no value. Ultimately, it's really about my experience that is the art here. It's my experience that is what is important, not this object that exists out in the world.

The thing about chocolate that is really, really interesting is that it is incredibly affordable. For $20 in my pocket, I can go into a chocolate store that focuses on high-end, small bars. And let's not get into definitions of craft and artisanal, but I can go in and get these bars from all these really interesting makers.

For $20, I can taste from among the world's best chocolates. I mean, I have my choice of many of them. And you can't do that with many other gourmet foods. If you want to test the world's best wine or taste the world's best wines, you're talking about spending tens of thousands of dollars on a bottle or more. And you know the Queen of England—the Queen of England—with all of her millions or billions or however much she has, can't buy better chocolate than I can. And that's really, really cool.

That's a really empowering aspect about chocolate: It's all attainable; everything out there is attainable. It's really cool.

SS: It's really cool. When you talk about Dewey and this connection, what comes up for me is, you know … The reason the podcast is called *The Slow Melt* is because of that sense of relationship. Chocolate is an experience you have or I have, and it's one that's built on these connections. So it's an object, but it's one that's connected to so many different people from the farm all the way to the ultimate end consumer.

CG: And that accessibility is very interesting. I can choose to focus on small makers. I can choose to focus on origins. I can choose to focus on a style. The points of entry into chocolate are really, really quite so amazing—the diversity.

One of the great things that's happened in the last 20 years is there has grown a base of small makers, not industrial makers.

Industrial makers are concerned with absolute consistency. They want the consumer experience to be the same every single time they put it in her mouth. And one of the definitions you might put on craft chocolate is that the experience of the chocolate will change—and it can change from harvest to harvest. Or it can change from batch to batch. I, as a consumer, get to experience all these wonderful little differences and wonderful influences, and what's going on, in a way that, again, I can't in many other foods.

One of the great things about chocolate is, you know, a 12-year-old can start this journey. I can start it from a very, very young age. And it is those connections to childhood that, I think, drive a lot of people and their relationships with chocolate.

I mean, the number of times I've talked to people, and we ask them, "What is your favorite chocolate and why?" And they go, "Well, I remember that I had a visit from my grandmother every winter, and she brought the special box with her, so my feeling about chocolate is all tied up in my relationship with my grandmother."

I have many of those from my childhood with my parents—special chocolates that we savor at particular times of year—that, for years, were my benchmarks for what good quality chocolate was all based on childhood memories.

SS: Thank you. I could go on and on with you. But I'm just going to ask you to come back on the show.

CG: It's my pleasure. I mean, whatever I can do to help people find their happy place in chocolate. It's really easy to get caught up, as sometimes I do, in the technical aspects of, you know, how the cocoa beans are fermented or the technical aspects of how chocolate is made. But, ultimately, it's really all about what about chocolate—what about consuming chocolate—makes you happy. And let's go there.

I want to go there as often as I can.

SS: I'm raising my hand over here wanting to go to that happy place, too.

CG: All right. Well, perhaps we can find that place together and help people find theirs as well.

SS: Exactly. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

CG: Yeah. Number one is I consider myself to be an equal opportunity chocolate lover. I will give every chocolate an opportunity to impress.

And I do not believe in this, sort of, attitude that says, "Well, if you like milk chocolate, you must not actually really like chocolate," or "Well, you're, like, a White Zinfandel lover, so you can't really like wine." I don't want that—that Paul Giamatti moment in Sideways where he goes into the alley with Thomas Haden Church and says, "If anybody orders the Merlot, I'm leaving." I would ask people when they think about chocolate not to say, "Well, I only eat 70 percent." Because that's meaningless.

Be open to everything. Experience every single flavor, every single texture that any chocolate in the world can give to you. Expand your horizons. Understand and you might surprise yourself. Oh my gosh. You know what? That's a white chocolate. It has flavor. I never knew white chocolate could have flavor! And, believe me, there are. There are some great white chocolate, just as there are great milk chocolates. And there are some pretty atrocious dark chocolates out there in the world as well. So be open-minded would be my number one comment to anyone who's embarking on this journey.

Karen Bryant

Executive Director, Fine Chocolate Industry Association

*There were technical difficulties with Simran's audio recording, so the following quotes are Karen's.

Karen Bryant: My name is Karen Bryant, and I'm the executive director of the Fine Chocolate Industry Association.

This is an organization that is made up of a wide range of members who are part of this small segment—defined chocolate segment—of the larger chocolate industry. We are here to support everyone in that industry—to create networking opportunities, educational opportunities, outreach to the media and to consumers. And we're still exploring all of the possibilities that are there for us to support people in the industry.

So, 10 years ago, Pam Williams of Ecole Chocolat and Mary Jo Stojak of Tiggrio Chocolates—they are the founding mothers of FCIA—assembled a group of bright stars, you know, of this emerging new segment of the industry to define what it is and who we are and what we're doing. People like Gary Guittard of Guittard Chocolate and Steve DeVries of DeVries Chocolate, and equipment manufacturers like Bakon USA, chocolatiers like Melanie Boudar and Michael Recchiuti, and chocolate connoisseur Chloé Doutre-Roussel.

They came together and sat in a room and said, "Alright, you know, who are we, and what do we want to call this organization?" They came up with the name Fine Chocolate Industry Association. So what does that mean? When I look on the website, these are the words that they created. They talked about fine chocolate products

being equal to natural food products—something that offers unique tastes and sensations and aromas. And they focused on the fine flavor cacao bean, where it all starts. So they talked about what's in this chocolate as opposed to industrial chocolate. Then they talked about how it was made with excellent manufacturing practices, and how the bean was grown and harvested, and what kind of ingredients would be included, which would be, you know, the least number of ingredients possible—no artificial substances.

They wanted to keep it true to its origin. And then they talked about how fine chocolate should appear. You know, whether it's bonbons or bars or artisan chocolate, it would be attractive and skillfully and artfully crafted. And I think this is only really clear in the context of the history of the U.S. chocolate industry because, up till that point, it was Hershey chocolate, Russell Stover, Whitman's Sampler.

These were the companies that had more than a hundred years to imprint in the U.S. psyche what chocolate should taste like in the United States. It wasn't until around the end of the 1990s, beginning of 2000, that Scharffen Berger came on the scene and said, "We want to try something different here."

Up until then, you know, Hershey was focused on, and thank goodness they did because they created an amazing industry, but they were focused on affordability and consistency. Can we make a chocolate bar that is affordable by the masses and will taste the same in Akron, Ohio, as it does in Memphis, Tennessee? And they did that, and they did it beautifully.

Whitman's and Russell Stover, they came on board and did a very similar thing. So, for more than a hundred years, the U.S. consumer got a very consistent milk chocolate, high sugar, very sweet sense of, "Alright, this is what chocolate is." And, in order to do that, they had to buy beans from all over the world—the least expensive beans they could find—roast all the flavor out, and then pour in their own ingredients, so that they can have this very consistent, quintessential Hershey flavor.

It's great, and I am … When I'm at the airport, and I'm racing to catch a plane and I haven't had lunch or breakfast, I will very quickly pick up a Hershey bar and scarf it down and enjoy it. And, you know, it brings back memories of my childhood and all of that.

But Scharffen Berger came along around 1997, '98, and said, "You know what? We want to do something different. We want to try something different." And it was not about consistency, and it was not about cost. It was about finding beans, understanding what impacts the flavor of a bean in a certain region, and then understanding how the processing of that bean will pull out a unique experience, a unique flavor.

That's what they did; that's what they created. And the public went nuts over this. Of course, this was in San Francisco and people had a little bit more money. But what they were doing there—they didn't call it fine chocolate—was carving out a segment of the industry for something different that was going to cost more, but was going to give consumers an amazing unique experience that they've never had before. And that's the beginning of it.

But here's the distinction. You know, it's really, I'm going to say it's about three main things.

It's having a relationship with the bean. So whether you're a small-batch chocolate maker or you call yourself a craft chocolate maker or bean-to-bar, it's—because you could be a bean-to-bar maker and have a huge factory because you get beans in and you're making chocolate from the bean, and you could have people in there working who know nothing about the bean, but they're just following their specific assembly line role …

If you are a chocolate maker and you have a relationship with the bean—and that might include knowing the farmer, understanding the terroir of the land, and knowing how the growing process and the harvesting, fermenting and drying processes impact the flavor of that bean—then you fall under the "fine chocolate" umbrella.

And another part of that is, you know, if you embrace inconsistency. Meaning from season to season, your chocolate may not taste the same, because you're not roasting out the flavor and putting in your own. So you

may have worked with the same farmer, and in one season that's more wet, and another season that's more—it's hot or they maybe had some problem. Your bar from that farmer is going to taste different from season to season, just like with wine. And that's what makes it interesting and that's what they're going for is interesting.

If you value unique flavor and experience for the consumer over cost, that also puts you under the "fine chocolate" umbrella. So it's not a hard-and-fast rule, but …

But certainly those three things are really important for the chocolate maker: If they have a relationship with a bean, if they're not afraid of inconsistency, and if they value flavor and experience for the consumer over cost, they fall under our umbrella.

Well, yeah, it is all over the map, and you're right. And Hershey and those and big chocolate—As I said, thank heaven they created the industry they did because that allows us to carve out this smaller segment of the industry where you're going to have a different flavor experience. Yes, you're going to pay more, but there are many good reasons why.

And consumers who are enjoying this fine chocolate don't seem to have a problem paying more. $10 a bar, sometimes even more. But you're right. With the influx of so many new people into the bean-to-bar, craft chocolate, smaller batch … Many of them are still on a very steep learning curve, and it's very easy to get some very nice packaging and to, you know, start getting out there with your bar. That's a little bit of a concern for all of us because we always want the very best to be out there representing the industry.

But, again, we have to remember that the fine chocolate segment of the industry is not even 20 years old, and a lot of these people are less than 10 years—less than five years even—coming into the industry.

So we're still on this learning curve, and that's what I was saying in the very beginning about how we define who we are, and how we can, you know, put value on what we do.

The thing that, I think, is a determining factor is not so much how we view ourselves, but how the consumer views us.

One of the first questions that I asked is: "Give me one word to define what fine chocolate is to you." So we're coming at it from a different place. And, you know, some of the words I got were: complex, rich, indulgent, meditative, elegant, transformative.

And I talk to them about, you know, "Have you ever paid $10 for a bar and not been satisfied?" And they said, "Oh, yes, many times."

But there have been many times when they have been satisfied. And they're beginning to educate themselves about what chocolate makers make the chocolate that gives them that transformative experience.

They also are becoming aware that these guys and gals are on a learning curve. So the more they follow a particular chocolate maker, they might see the growth. So, you know, yes, they're still eating a Hershey bar from time to time, or a Lindt bar, but they're also experimenting with these newer chocolate makers.

I mean, Art Pollard, who was one of the first to fill the void of Scharffen Berger, he's only been around for 12 years. That's still fairly new. So they follow Art, they follow Steve DeVries; they follow the guys who helped start this movement.

So, again, the questions that you raised are very appropriate questions. But we have to see that within the context of this being such a new industry.

Right, and we were concerned about that in the industry as well, and who is the determiner as to taste, you know, as to the quality of a particular bar. And, yes, if a consumer does go out on the ledge there and doesn't normally spend $10, but suddenly they do and they, unfortunately, ended up with something that didn't satisfy.

Yeah, that could definitely color them. But what I found in the research that I did around the United States, we went to, first, chocolate festivals, and then the focus groups that I did were held at specialty chocolate shops. So we weren't out there in the general public. We were out there in the public that has already identified as wanting a special chocolate experience. So maybe in our phase two, we'll be able to get out to the general public.

But what our industry wants right now is information about how we can raise awareness really around exactly what you're asking me. And so our first step to help our members is to go out there and get this baseline information, which is what we've done. And you know what? Even though we're not done analyzing the results, what I can report is that many of the chocolate makers that we've connected with—when I asked them, "How do you find out … How do you know where to where to buy or what chocolate to buy?

And if they're lucky enough to live in a city where there is a fine chocolate shop—like in Salt Lake City, we have Caputo's Market & Deli, and they have classes and tastings and, I mean, that was the most educated group of chocolate consumers that I encountered. It was really amazing.

They knew the chocolate makers, they knew the history, they knew that some of them had just gotten new equipment, and it was really, truly amazing. So we see that that's one of the things that we, as an organization, need to support is people like Aubrey Lindley. I think their shop is called Cacao.

If you've got a fine shop like that, how can we support you so that you can raise awareness and reach more consumers? Because that's really where it's going to happen. It's not that somebody is going to read a booklet and then become educated.

They need to go and taste and have someone standing next to them, just like I did when I was learning how to work with chocolate. I needed to go and have a chocolatier or a chef stand next to me and say, "Here's what I want you to see and notice." It's the same thing with the consumer because we're really giving them a new experience.

But it's a new landscape, a new territory. And that's part of what our organization is searching for: How can we help to not necessarily educate but to support the people who could be out there giving consumers that educated new awareness and experience?

Oh yeah. I think it's a great story and it's really the U.S. capitalistic story. So Scharffen Berger came on the scene in San Francisco around 1997, '98, and it really did create a revolution, although not a lot of other chocolate makers jumped on board at that point. But I think people were watching them and just sort of holding their breath to see what is this all about.

And, of course, guess what happened. Hershey took notice. And I don't, in any way, mean to paint Hershey in a negative light. I'm so appreciative of the industry that they've created and the knowledge that they've brought and the work that they do about understanding the bean. So please don't, in any way, misinterpret this.

But the Hershey Company took notice of Scharffen Berger and bought them in 2005 and moved them from San Francisco, from their shop, away from their equipment, and moved them to the Hershey plant. And, you know, I can only report what I've been told that many people felt that there was a void, a big void. And they hoped that the Scharffen Berger work would continue as it had.

But people felt that there was a void, and Art Pollard and Steve DeVries were some of the first people to go in and fill that void. And, you know, around 2005, '06, '07, there were really only a handful of people who were getting in there and trying to do what Scharffen Berger had done and expand on that.

That was around the time that Pam Williams of Ecole Chocolat and Mary Jo Stojak—that's when they said, "Hmm, something's happening here. Let's take a look. Let's get together. Let's talk about what this is."

And it had not, at that point, been called the fine chocolate segment. This was also the time that John Nanci of

Chocolate Alchemy created a website so that anybody who wanted to—very democratic—try to make chocolate could buy some beans from him, could buy some small equipment, and, in their own kitchens, start to experiment.

Many of the fine, craft chocolate makers today started out that way. Now they were just a handful. And today, it's hard to get a very firm estimate, but there are close to 200 craft chocolate makers and growing as of today. I think in the U.S., there are around 200 craft chocolate makers.

Now they're not all making money; they're not all, you know, surviving.

And that's another part of the industry. People are starting—and some of them are doing really fine work—but they're not all surviving economically.

But at the same time, it's not just the chocolate makers. At the same time, around 2005, '06, there were chocolatiers who were taking note of things changing. We had Fran Bigelow of Fran's Chocolates, Michael Recchiuti of Recchiuti Confections, Norman Love of Norman Love Confections. And they were beginning to focus more on unusual spices and pairing of flavors, locally sourced ingredients and very artful and colorful presentations that we had not seen before. They weren't as concerned about creating chocolate that was going to last for months on the shelf, but, again, to create a consumer experience that—yes, it was going to cost more, but it was going to give consumers something that they had never experienced before. So both on the chocolate maker and the chocolatier ends of the spectrum, new things were happening.

And Pam and Mary Jo called together representatives of these sectors and also people from equipment companies that were starting to focus on this new chocolate experience and said, "Hey, you know, what is going on here? What can we do to help support all of you and help the consumer understand what this new landscape is?"

That was in 2007. That was how FCIA came to be. We're celebrating 10 years now. And it's pretty amazing when you think that that was right before the 2008 economic disaster. So the fact that FCIA was able to survive that, and many of the chocolatiers and chocolate makers were able to survive and are now thriving … There's just a lot to celebrate and a lot to think about. What do we want the next 10 years to be?

I do want to under underline the three distinctions. For it to fall under that new American chocolate experience, it's really about the relationship with the bean, embracing inconsistency, and valuing flavor and experience over costs. Those are the three things that I would want to underline.

Those are my insights from the research from the two-months drive I did around the country, from the research that I've done, from all of the talking that I've done.

Karen emailed follow-up:

When you asked how I see the difference between craft chocolate makers and the industrial chocolate makers, I mentioned several times that the relationship with the bean is one telling point. You, appropriately, pushed back on that since Hershey has spent time and resources on understanding cultivation of the bean, the genetics and processing. What I failed to clarify is that, at least in my understanding, big chocolate like Hershey is not committed to bringing out the unique flavor of a particular bean. They purchase beans from around the world based on cost and availability, roast the unique flavor out of them and then add in ingredients to create the quintessential Hershey flavor—a flavor that is consistent around the world.

The small-batch craft chocolate makers' relationship with the bean is different. They are not concerned about consistency or cost. They are committed to the flavor potential of that variety or blend and finding the right processing methods and equipment that will allow them to realize that flavor. That's a different relationship with the bean.

Another example of the fine chocolate community's relationship with the bean is evidenced in the Heirloom Cacao Preservation Fund, once an FCIA project and now its own 501(c)(3) sister organization. This organization is committed to saving the fine flavor beans around the world by identifying them, studying them, supporting the farmers who grow them and helping them find a place in the marketplace so that others may experience them.

Please note, I'm not saying that one relationship is better than the other. I am merely clarifying my understanding of the difference in the relationship to the bean: Big chocolate is focused on creating consistency and a low-cost product, often using additives to create a flavor; small-batch/craft chocolate is focused on exploring the unique flavor potential of each bean, understanding how processing methods enhance that flavor and then offering these unique flavor experiences to consumers, usually with very few ingredients.

Sunita de Tourreil

Founder, The Chocolate Garage

Sunita de Tourreil: I'm Sunita de Tourreil, and I am the founder of The Chocolate Garage in Palo Alto, California.

Simran Sethi: Tell me more about what The Chocolate Garage is.

ST: The Chocolate Garage is a space that is used, in the broad sense, to build a healthy ecosystem for chocolate—for craft chocolate, if we want to call it that for today's purposes. So we do educational tastings; we partner with small makers and directly connect our customers to our makers, in terms of funding and creating new bars; and we also retail chocolate that is heavily curated to meet the criteria that we have for the chocolate that we carry.

SS: You've been involved in chocolate for over a dozen years. Tell me why you chose this substance.

ST: I've realized as I left molecular biology and studying prion disease, which is what I did prior to moving into happy chocolate, as I call it … So I left mad cows for happy chocolate. I had always been interested in where things come from my whole life. What is the story behind something I'm buying? And is it in line with what I want to see in the world? And as I further explored this and went to various conferences and, sort of, did a deeper dive into what was a hobby when I was a scientist … I came to see chocolate and cacao as a really interesting vehicle to awaken people to thinking about where things came from, in a really human way. So cacao and chocolate became, for me, this way of connecting people and having people think about where things came from and also experience, I mean and that really in a happy and joyful way, the magic of chocolate—that melt, the delicious flavors—and then take it deeper than just the experience. Think about all of the underneath—all the hands and hearts behind the product.

SS: You talk about how the collection The Chocolate Garage offers is heavily curated. What does that exactly mean? What are you looking for and how do you define happy chocolate?

ST: For me, happy chocolate is that intersection of being absolutely delicious, but then also looking at how was it made and trying to understand, you know, was the farm paid well above fair-trade or commodity prices? Was the connection from the farmer to the person who bought the cacao as short as possible, so that the maximum amount of the cost of the cacao went to the farmer? Did the chocolate maker then elaborate the chocolate in a way that that created an absolutely delicious bar that was made with integrity? So I'm really interested in seeing that combination of quality and also valuing that whole supply chain or value web in a completely new way.

SS: One of the terms that gets thrown around a lot is "sustainable chocolate." I wondered if you have any thoughts, as you're one of the most respected purveyors in this business. How do you perceive these attempts to

create or distribute sustainably produced chocolate? Do you have a working definition for yourself of what sustainable is?

ST: In general, within chocolate and outside of chocolate, I think sustainable is a word that we need to go beyond. I think sustainable is not good enough. This notion of something that is nourishing and feeds the system that we're working in is what we need. Sustainable almost seems like just neutral, but instead of taxing the environment and the people, get to a place where you know we're having no impact. And I think that we need to go much further than that and actually give back and build systems that are actually going to feed one another. It's too late to try to be sustainable, in my opinion.

SS: I love that. I was just talking to a farmer from Cameroon earlier this morning, and he was talking about how this holds no meaning for him. So that's why I wanted to know what it meant to you.

OK, so let's move into craft chocolate. How do you define craft chocolate?

ST: I think within the industry, the way we talk about craft chocolate, our assumptions are that it is a product, a chocolate product, that typically is starting with the cacao seed or bean and is being turned into finished chocolate by a person or a few people who are controlling the different steps along the way. And that there's hands involved. I think that when you look at the word craftsmanship or craftswomanship, I think that it's clear that it's something that's being made by hand. But that requires skill and experience. So, you know, the craft chocolate makers in the United States who are making very small batch, who are starting, you know, oftentimes with a tabletop grinder and then eventually getting better equipment.

ST: I think that our basic definition of craft chocolate is folks who are working with it in a very hands-on way. In my mind, craft also implies some level of quality. But I think that the difficulty right now in craft chocolate—and because, in a sense, the barrier is so low to start making chocolate with a tabletop grinder and some nice packaging, I think that quality is one of the problems that we're seeing in craft chocolate. There's just such a wide variety of quality and also understanding the depth of experience and knowledge and skill within this group that we're calling craft chocolate makers, who make very small amounts by hand.

SS: So take me back a little bit to the history of this craft chocolate movement. When did it start and who, would you say, are the founders of this movement?

ST: It was back in 2006 or 2005. I'm not sure exactly the year that Craft Chocolate Makers of America was formed. And the early chocolate makers at that time—I think there were about five—all got together and created this definition and started this organization where they wanted to try to define this term.

I think it's really important that this term craft chocolate … One of the problems I see with it is that, as an industry, we have no control over this term. It is being used left and right by all kinds of folks who are definitely not touching anything with their hands, who have a really industrial process, and they're using the word craft or crafted in their products.

So I think what the Craft Chocolate Makers of America had done back in mid-2000 was define, you know, what is the volume? What is the reasonable maximum amount that you need to be working with to be considered craft? And there were various other definitions to this.

And I can tell you the names of the makers: This was Patric Chocolate, Askinosie, Taza, Steve DeVries, who was DeVries Chocolate at the time, and I think I'm forgetting one—Amano. Those were the makers who were the original Craft Chocolate Makers of America. And one of the things that's happened over the years is they've tried to figure out: How do we bring new folks in?

How do we continue to run this as a volunteer organization, where they had one person who was the president and would run it and think about those issues, as they were all trying to grow their businesses? And, keep in mind, 10 years ago, it was really difficult to sell a chocolate bar for $5 or $6—and that was nowhere near what it cost those makers to make that chocolate, in terms of the amount of experience and skill they needed to gather

before they could sell anything, and then the amount of time it would take to put together a wonderful bar.

So this was a really a difficult challenge to try to maintain this organization and figure out: How do we bring new people on? Do we have some sort of measure of quality by which people have to achieve a certain quality to be part of Craft Chocolate Makers of America? Is it a measure of quality or not?

These are the kinds of struggles that they've had over the years. I attended many of those meetings as somebody to input from the retailer side, and, unfortunately, the group of old chocolate makers and new chocolate makers were unable to really come to any sort of consensus as to what would and should be included. And it's, sort of, gone idle, the Craft Chocolate Makers of America. So I think that there are some other efforts underway to try to define, you know, should it be a guild?

The difficult thing is that everyone's busy trying to build their own business. It's very hard for one or a few makers to dedicate lots of time just to building these definitions and, what's the word, protecting them. When you use a word, you need to be able to protect that word or it will get misused, as it is being misused these days by big players who want to tap into this very quickly growing market.

SS: And, as you mentioned, also those smaller ones—because if quality isn't a parameter, then, in some sense, it's just as challenging for a consumer as maybe a big manufacturer also co-opting those same phrases. Like, you're not going to ultimately get substance that you would have necessarily enjoyed if it was made by someone who doesn't know what he or she is doing. But then, of course, we could also see, you know, large-scale manufacturers taking those same terms and creating something that also doesn't have that same intentionality.

ST: Yeah, absolutely. And I think that this notion of bean-to-bar even is one of the questions that, these days, some of my peers are talking about. Let's define what bean-to-bar means. There's also, I think, some folks feel that bean-to-bar is not a maker, like Lindt … You know, that there's this notion that bean-to-bar is, by definition, smaller. So it's similar to what this term craft chocolate is trying to show. I mean, again, it comes down to quality. In my mind, bean-to-bar is a very, very clear set of words that describes where you're starting and where you're ending.

And, for me, I'm agnostic as to whether you are a huge company or a tiny company that is working bean-to-bar. So that's a problematic definition, as well, because I think that a lot of people think bean-to-bar is a very new thing that's very exciting, but it's allowing us to be more connected to where cacao starts and get to know the farmer and reward them better. So I think both of those terms are difficult and each have their problems.

SS: Can you think of a word that would be closer to what you are describing?

ST: I think it's all about protecting the words … I, personally, choose to describe it as happy chocolate which, for me, is about intentionality; it's about how it was made, how it was sourced. Is it made in a way that I agree with and I want to see more of because it's nourishing to the earth and to the people who are involved all the way from the growing to the end person who's eating the delicious bar?

So that's obviously my preference because it's always what I've cared about and what I want to try to build. But in terms of something very descriptive, you know, I guess some notion of a batch size. So is it small batch, starting with the cocoa bean and ending with the finished bar?

I mean, I think I don't really have a great answer other than you could describe the volume of the production, and the fact that the person or a few people who are involved in overseeing all the important steps. So, you know, selecting the bean, roasting it, all the steps all the way through to the finished chocolate, I suppose. I think that I hesitate to get into that, and this is one of the things that the Craft Chocolate Makers of America struggled with: Do you have to mold your own bars? Is tempering and molding part of that really difficult process or not?

They came up with a compromise and decided that you didn't have to mold. It was OK to outsource the molding, but that the other steps are all really important. And, you know, that was more just because of the group of first, initial makers and what they were doing rather than any sort of, I guess, principled choice as to

what were the most important things. Because I think that most bean-to-bar makers or craft chocolate makers these days are doing all of those steps, are not outsourcing the molding. They're doing everything in factory. And that seems like a critical part of what they're doing.

SS: This is evolving in real time, obviously. Even with the founders you just mentioned, people like Shawn Askinosie and Alex Whitmore have … I mean, the growth of their companies is exponential. So under those original definitions, would they still qualify as craft chocolate makers?

ST: Right. And that definition was set, you know, 10 years ago, and I'm not sure that they imagined, in their wildest dreams, that this would be how things would go—that things would grow so much. Absolutely. I don't know that that Alex Whitmore of Taza … Taza's certainly much larger than Askinosie, but I don't know if they would still fit that criteria. This is one of the things that got discussed in those meetings, as to, you know, how do we keep this relevant? And then, do you kick people out once they've gotten too big?

If you can get big in a way that actually is nourishing to all involved, then shouldn't that be good? Maybe there's intentionality that. I mean, this is a question I would ask: Shouldn't there be some reward for that or some way of labeling that?

SS: I don't know if we're any closer to any, sort of, conclusion about this definition—and, as consumer demand grows, you know there's this kind of need. There's greater urgency in trying to help consumers determine what craft chocolate is.

And I wonder, in the absence of a singular coherent definition, like we find with specialty coffee or even craft beer, though that's evolving: How would you suggest consumers navigate an increasingly crowded chocolate shelf?

ST: I think that the difficulty is there's so much to learn. I see new folks coming into the industry—various folks, bloggers or just people who are interested in understanding and promoting fine chocolate. And there's such a steep learning curve. And understanding the history of what has happened over the past 10 years and how things have evolved and even things down to, you know, nomenclature. Why do some people refer to a bar that is made with beans from a particular farm in two or three different ways, even though it's exactly the same beans from the same farm? You know, we don't have any rules around naming, even for origin.

So, seeing new folks coming in and feeling frustrated by this or wondering, you know, why is this not more clear? I mean, the problem is that this is such a new industry. There are no rules. There are basic rules as to what you have to have on the front of your package, which includes the weight of the bar, the fact that it's chocolate, and that's about it.

There are just no, sort of, rules for people to follow; it's really, kind of, the Wild West. And so the solution that I see, for now, is—I look at my colleagues who are in the field, who are deeply knowledgeable, who've been selling specialty chocolate for a long time, who have an understanding of who the makers are, where the beans come from, all the different steps. They're really the primary people right now who are outward facing to their markets, and sometimes beyond when they're interviewed and ask questions, and someone does a really good story about craft chocolate and what it's about. They are really the forefront of folks who are educating customers.

But even that, you know, that customer has to go and find these specialty shops. There's only five or six across the United States. And if you don't go to those specialty shops, and you're either shopping online or you're shopping at a grocery store, where they have some specialty bars, you don't have any idea.

Price does not tell you how good it's going to be. Ingredient list does not tell you how good it's going to be. Origin doesn't necessarily tell you how good it's going to be. And marketing certainly is there to make you buy without really understanding whether what's being sold to you, whether it's a sophisticated package or a heart-tugging package that that makes you feel like you're going to be doing good by buying this bar. All of those things need to be investigated. And the average customer is not going to be able to understand, with any sophistication and depth, what the different bars are that are on the market.

This is actually why I started The Chocolate Garage, because I was frustrated standing at Whole Foods, looking at all these different bars that were telling me one thing or the other—whether it was percentage or whether it was that they were putting profits toward saving the planet or species or whatever. And I started digging in and trying to see: Is this the real deal? Is this just marketing?

That's what, sort of, led me down … I thought, you know, this is so complex and so difficult. I'm going to do the work, and then I'm going to be the one who can share my understanding and my learnings from all of these different products, and who's, sort of, the real deal and who isn't.

That was 12 years ago and it, sincerely, it does take an incredible amount of paying attention and making it your primary thing, which is what I've done, to be able to understand this space. So there isn't an easy answer as to what a customer should do to get educated because it's so complex, and there isn't yet the respect that's paid to, you know … Right now, for example, there are a lot of people in these mainstream, you know, just wine lovers who have a deep understanding of wine.

There are websites they can read with really good information; there's scientific understanding of what makes a good wine. So, you know, those things don't yet exist. The quality even of the information that's out there around cacao and chocolate—it's not always very high. Like I said, it is a really complex field and everyone comes at it from a different angle, so I guess that's not a great answer.

SS: Well, it's a frustrating answer because you referenced, at the beginning of your commentary, about chocolate bloggers that when they're talking about craft chocolate x, y and z, but you yourself have confirmed that there is no definition of craft chocolate. So you're asking … I mean, I guess you're not asking … But the confusion lies in the fact that the people who are actually making the chocolate haven't even established a definition.

ST: Right. And they think that, you know, that's probably not atypical of a new food movement.

So how do we look at flavors, and how do we make it clear that when these certain traits are in a particular cacao, that that commands a better price? I think that's a really important part of creating a system where …

There is a more objective way of assessing what the price ought to be, that farmers know and makers know, and because it's not just the farmer. I mean, you have makers who are overpaying for a cacao that is deeply flawed and is not something that's workable—and then turning out bars that are really problematic. This is really concerning to me because I'm really interested in seeing a healthy ecosystem for cocoa and chocolate where price and quality are connected. And when you have people overpaying for cacao that's not good enough, not worth that price … I'm an absolute proponent for cacao costing more and more it's not that …

It's not that I don't want cacao to cost more and bars to cost more. We've been at the forefront of helping our customers understand this is why this bar is so expensive. Because this is the work that went into it. So that's not a problem for me, but my concern is: When you pay for something that isn't about quality, then you start to mess up the signals for farmers.

You know, if I'm a farmer, and I have some new young American maker coming in and wanting to buy my cacao, and I can sort of bang it out without having to really worry too much about fermentation and drying, and I'm still going to get a great price—great! That's great for me. I'm serving the person who wants to buy it.

But the problem there is that then it just … we start to lose access to carefully fermented and dried cacao that meets a certain quality standard. So I think that it's good to keep in mind that this is such an early time in the premium cacao industry, and these things will settle down. Organizations will be built.

I think we just need to keep working on all of these seemingly, sort of, different angles. There are so many angles to take, you know, to approach this product by. And I think that if we can somewhat collaborate and if people are open, I think it's really important that … This is maybe not related, but I was just thinking about this.

I think one of the problems for new makers is that when they think, “Oh, you know, I'm going to go out and taste some craft chocolate. I'm going to go see what's out there to know how I’m doing.” And when they access bars that are made by makers who may not yet be at their prime or may not quite understand yet how to make a beautiful bar out of this particular cacao, then that lowers the bar for everyone, in terms of what you're trying to achieve.

And it occurred to me in the past months that part of the problem is that new makers are sourcing what's readily available—and what's readily available most of the time is not the top, top stuff, the top bars, you know, made by the greats, who would be, like, Patric and Rogue and makers of that caliber. They’re actually really hard to find. And so if they're not readily available, new makers are not tasting them, and they're not getting a sense of, like, this is one of the bars that should be set for me, in terms of what I’m trying to achieve.

I think that one of the problems is not that new makers don't have access to the beans, necessarily. I mean, that is a potential problem—and the ability to discern great cacao, that is an incredibly difficult skill to have. That is just not something you can learn in a textbook. I think a lot of new makers don't seem to be reading any textbooks or even understanding the basic science of making chocolate. But even beyond that, there are certain things you learn through experience. Even if you have access to the same beans, the new makers are not necessarily tasting the best chocolate out there to get a sense of what they're trying to achieve technically—whether it comes down to the texture, how it melts, what the temper should be like, what the different possible roasts are that allow you to bring out the best flavors and in a particular bean.

So folks are looking on a shallow level, like, “Oh, I’m going to order some craft chocolate, either direct from the maker or just, you know, online through to an organization that's putting together lots of different craft chocolate.” And they’re tasting those bars that are readily available. The problem is the bars that are the most readily available right now are not the best bars. They are sort of … I call them—I have two young children. So I talk about how you practice until you get better. And I feel like there are a lot of makers who ought to still be practicing, sharing their chocolate in various ways, but not selling it yet.

And, yet, those bars are being wrapped up and put out into the market. And so new makers come on, they taste stuff that has all kinds of problems with it—be it super astringent, or bitter, or just really sort of green, and problematic in terms of off-flavors. And they think, “Oh, OK, well, this is what chocolate is supposed to taste like. This is craft chocolate. This is made by a maker that, in my mind, is an established maker, who may be four or five years old.” And not tasting, not only craft chocolate makers who've been making for 10 years, who have a deep understanding of how to make chocolate—but beyond that, tasting the greats, the folks who are at a much larger scale, but are making higher quality chocolate, both technically and flavor wise …

SS: What we're seeing right now is a real dearth in understanding for consumers and that, to me, is of grave concern. Because people are making an investment, and they're making assessments about what craft chocolate is based on stuff that might be subpar and, perhaps, abandoning the possibility of craft chocolate altogether because they tasted something that was janky. You know?

So I wonder if people don't necessarily have access to The Chocolate Garage or Cacao or Chocolopolis, where do they go for this information? I mean, how can we—in the absence of maybe clarity from the industry itself, is there a way for consumers to actually be empowered and make decisions that will align? You know, because this is an investment—of course, it's not a ridiculously large investment, but it's still—we're asking of people to go from spending 99 cents on a candy bar to maybe $10, $20 on a fine chocolate bar. And that leap is one I take quite seriously in the sense of I don't want to lose people along the way because they had experiences with stuff that wasn't maybe the best, as you said. So how do you reconcile that or what do you suggest?

ST: Customers who want to take some time to understand can scour the internet and find some reasonable articles and reasonable references as to where they might want to go if they want to taste the best stuff. Customers who don't do that I guess, in a sense, they're going to get what they get. And a lot of times, people just like the fact that craft chocolate has more flavor than non-craft chocolates or the big industrial, sort of, candy bars that you mention.

That's interesting to them even if it's not nuanced, it's not as good as it can be—or it's, you know, in my world, sort of, like, deeply flawed and not delicious and not something I want to continue eating. I have customers come in and tell me, with various bars they'll say, "Oh, this was an award-winner," or "This is, like, an expensive bar that I found at a fancy store and it was awful." But they don't necessarily know what to do with that information.

Just like you said, it sort of discredits the category at large. So I think I'm optimistic on the customer level. Where I'm less optimistic is around the makers. It's so frustrating to me. You know, I have folks who come into The Chocolate Garage and start chatting with me and say, "Oh yeah, I make chocolate," and I find out that they've been making chocolate for, like, months—you know, less than a year. And they are putting their product into a particular store that has credibility and has been around a long time. And I haven't tasted that particular maker, but I've tasted enough makers—I taste everything that comes out—to know that the vast majority of what I get that's new that we taste in a blind way does not cut it.

And, as you know, not only not perfect—it's just not something you want to be eating.

It's super problematic. It's what it would taste like if I made chocolate because I don't know how to make chocolate, but I know that I don't know how to make chocolate. And so these folks come in, and not only have they only been making for a few months … And they're excited because, you know, I understand on a personal level that somebody who's searching for something that they want to do, and they get involved with cacao and chocolate it feels good and it's really exciting.

But the problem is that we're trivializing what it is to be a chocolate maker. You know, if we're going to use the word "craft," then the idea is that: to learn a craft. You know, go to Japan and learn a craft. You'll be learning for 10 years before you're allowed to make anything or even put your product out. I hear stories about particular products, where you go and study under a master and then, when you achieve a certain level of quality and you get the blessing from the master, that's when you're allowed to make chocolate. So I'm really concerned with the trivialization of chocolate making, as a craft, as something that is a complex skill that needs to be learned.

When I have a new maker coming in and asking me, and I'm, sort of, going deep on the bars that we carry and where the beans are from, and they trivially asked me if I know of a particular shop that's one of the top six, you know—"Do you know this shop?" And I think to myself: You asking me that question as to whether or not I know that shop shows that you have no idea even what The Chocolate Garage does or is, you know, that there's five or six of us who do this work.

And, yes, of course we know of each other. We often know each other very well and work together in various ways, and the fact that a chocolate maker who is about to release a bar doesn't even know where the best makers sell and who the top shops are is deeply troubling to me. It just goes to show that there is operation in a vacuum. You know, making this bar—it's fun, it's exciting, it's a new business that you're starting with, you know, a friend or on your own and having no understanding of the landscape, of the industry that I mean.

That's close to my heart. And it's upsetting to me, in part, because I hear the stories from chocolate makers and how difficult it is to make a great bar and chocolate that doesn't get turned, you know, put out because it was not workable. And that cacao is a loss, and they can't make chocolate from it. I hear all the struggles that makers with integrity—who are making a really high quality product—go through. And then it pains me to see folks just, sort of, randomly throwing chocolate out that without any understanding of what they're doing. It's really just came out this way. Not really sure. Still learning why. That is something that I think is really problematic because when you know customers will get educated, more and more information will get out there, and, over time, we will have organizations that do a good job of educating folks. But the fact that there is this trivialization and disrespect of the amount of skill and understanding and talent that goes into making good chocolate is what's more troubling to me.

SS: That's so beautiful. I'm so glad you touched upon this part.

Carla Martin

Founder and Executive Director, Fine Cacao and Chocolate Institute

Carla Martin: My name's Carla Martin, and I am a lecturer in the Department of African and African American Studies at Harvard University and the executive director of the Fine Cacao and Chocolate Institute, a small nonprofit organization.

Simran Sethi: How do you define fine cacao and chocolate?

CM: Fine cacao and chocolate—I look at it as a specific segment of the market for a cacao. And there's a combination of both genetic, historical and social components that go into what constitutes fine cacao, and chocolate is then the end product made from that raw material.

SS: So, when we talk about the end product … Fine chocolate … how is that distinct from something like craft chocolate?

CM: You know, I would actually put craft chocolate in with fine chocolate. I would look at fine chocolate as sort of an overarching umbrella term into which craft chocolate products often fit. And that is specifically because many craft chocolate makers are bean-to-bar chocolate makers working with cacao that fits within a sort of broader definition of what is considered fine cacao or specialty cacao. They are also then producing a chocolate product that is geared or aimed at a niche premium market as opposed to a bulk commercial market.

SS: I know these terms are used quite interchangeably. Would you help me and differentiate between fine—let's start with fine—chocolate and craft chocolates? If craft nests within fine, how are those two terms defined?

CM: Sure. Fine chocolate, at least at present, is broadly defined for a sort of premium or specialty category of the market. This segment of the market probably makes up about 1 percent of the 100 percent chocolate industry today. So we're looking at maybe $100 million in, sort of, total volume of sales, depending on how much we narrow it down. I see it as a broader umbrella overarching term because it encapsulates both chocolate makers and chocolatiers, as well as chocolate manufacturers, the larger private sector companies that are producing premium products that are geared toward a consumer base that want something of purported higher quality.

Craft chocolate then, sort of, fits within that in a smaller niche because it is small-scale chocolate makers who are transforming cacao beans into chocolate, most often overseeing the entirety of that process. And, in general, they tend also to be sourcing their cacao differently than much larger companies are and offering a different value proposition to consumers.

The history of fine chocolate is really quite interesting, as is the history of fine cacao, because these are always parts of what has been considered the realm of chocolate.

We can look all the way back to the history of early Mayan cultivation of cacao and production of cacao and chocolate products, and see that concepts like quality and terroir were of immense value to different sectors of the population.

So we know that, fundamentally, a notion of fine cacao and chocolate has always existed and is, in fact, an indigenous notion that was adopted by Europeans when they began to consume cacao and chocolate through that encounter with indigenous people.

Today, fine cacao and chocolate is often looking back toward an 1800s or early 1900s approach to chocolate making that tended to work with smaller-scale equipment with beans that were sourced from a single origin …

That, figuratively, sort of, reduced the distance between producers of cacao and consumers of chocolate. And it really took off with excitement among French chocolate producers—companies like Bonnat, like Valrhona or Bernachon in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s—who began producing single-origin chocolate products that were meant to express a sense of terroir through their flavor.

And it was then taken up by Scharffen Berger, of course, which is now owned by Hershey's, in the late 90s in the United States. And that then inspired a real kind of pioneering wave of very small-scale chocolate makers—people like Steve DeVries, or Alex Whitmore of Taza Chocolate or Joe Whinney of Theo Chocolate. Of course, these companies have now grown in size, both Taza and Theo, but it has very much lead to a resurgence of interest in seeing chocolate that has been crafted by artisans—and that reflects a local sense of flavor in what is very much a global product.

SS: So that's the history of fine cacao and fine chocolate. How would you then distinguish the history of craft chocolate?

CM: That's the history looking specifically at how the, kind of, strain of craft chocolate bars came out. But if you look at the history of fine chocolate more broadly, what you see is that, with this resurgence of single-origin, terroir-focused products in France, that was often correlating with a growth in the premium chocolate market in Belgium and Switzerland and other countries in Europe, a competition among these countries to show that their products nationally were the most finely crafted or the best tasting to link these with projects of ethno-nationalism, and a growth in consumer want for more premium chocolate products that has now spread throughout North America, through many South America and chocolate consuming countries throughout South Asia, throughout Africa and through East Asia as well, which is now seeing a real growth in chocolate consumption. And so when we move more to that, kind of, umbrella sense of what fine chocolate is, we see it as a growth in the premium category much more significantly.

SS: I want to be clear, because you mentioned Steve, Alex and, of course, that points to the creation of the CCMA [Craft Chocolate Makers of America]. So can you now diverge then and talk a little bit about the history of the craft chocolate movement as distinct from the fine chocolate history that you were describing?

CM: Sure. So the history of the craft chocolate movement is separate in an important way, from the broader premium or fine chocolate movement, in that it aims to oversee by-hand, as much as possible, the artisan process of crafting finished products. And also in many cases, it also aims to actually shepherd the sourcing of cacao from the farm or exporter level all the way to the doors of a chocolate maker.

And, ultimately, what it ends up doing is creating a sense—among both chocolate makers, among many of the people producing cacao from whom they are sourcing, and among consumers—of a decrease in distance between producers and consumers, and of a much more hands-on practice of both sourcing and crafting a finished product.

SS: Well, in terms of history, I mean what kind of timing are we talking about, in terms of this development and the creation? And then I'd like to drill down into some of the parameters of the CCMA as one of the, kind of, stakes through which craft chocolate, kind of, disseminated or was originally or early on defined. But if you could tell me a little bit about … What is still unclear is when this began and how it began.

CM: Sure. So in the 1990s, the company Scharffen Berger was importantly producing chocolate products that were being marketed as single origin, and they were using smaller-scale, sometimes vintage, equipment to do so. And this took off and was exciting to a certain segment of chocolate consumers in North America especially, and was inspiring to many others.

We've also seen chocolate makers, like Steve DeVries, who began working around that time period, who were selling their products in the early 2000s and who were similarly producing things in a semi-vintage manner. They were often purchasing equipment and rehabbing it—equipment that had been used decades before—and figuring out new ways that it might be used. They were often reading historical texts that had been written a hundred or more years before that offered advice on how to produce the best quality finished chocolate products.

And this was inspiring to many different chocolate makers. The list is one that should be, hopefully, exciting to many people out there today. They're companies like SOMA Chocolatemaker, like French Broad Chocolates, like Patric Chocolate, like Rogue Chocolatier, who, in the mid-2000s, were really taking off with these ideas

around producing small-scale, primarily single-origin, chocolate bars and then expanding into producing bars with inclusions or other added flavors. And then in the case of some companies, like French Broad Chocolates, even including confections and moving to produce all of their confections from their single-origin chocolate, and even then moving into pastries and really having a very diversified income stream. But, all of the while, sourcing their product very differently and producing it very differently than large-scale chocolate manufacturers typically would produce it.

This handful of early chocolate makers in this, kind of, vein of working then inspired what Jessica Ferraro of Bar Cacao has, sort of, dubbed "The class of 2010," which is a real expansion of chocolate makers in North America, but also chocolate makers around the globe. Many people even working at origin, working with cacao grown very close to where they were working, who then took up different ways of producing cacao and chocolate.

And there were a number of other factors that played into all of this as well. For example, John Nanci, who runs the website Chocolate Alchemy, early on in this process, made it possible for people to buy some smaller-scale equipment for small amounts of beans to be sold and for people to play around with making chocolate in their own ways at home even.

That was in addition to pastry chefs, like Rhonda Ruckman, taking up an interest in working with really fine craft chocolate in their pastries and a variety of other things, like the development of Cocoa Town processing machines that would allow people to actually craft chocolate in smaller batches with less of the initial startup costs needed to start a factory.

SS: Thank you. So when we look at this development, what is the size of the market now versus the 1990s? How many people were involved as craft chocolate makers throughout the world then, and what does it look like today?

CM: If we look at just the North American context in the 1990s, we're talking single digit companies were involved in making chocolate in this manner. In North America today, it's now over 200 companies. If we can add in Europe, we're looking at probably closer to 300 companies. And if we then add in, there are even a few small companies in Africa; there are a number in Latin America and the Caribbean. There are also a few in East, South and Southeast Asia.

So we're looking at more like 350, probably, companies that are operating today at a small scale. And within that group, there's still a great deal of diversity. So there are some companies that are making maybe, you know, a few thousand chocolate bars per year, working with maybe a few tons of cacao, perhaps even less, all the way up to companies that are working with more like 20 tons of cacao per year and producing chocolate that can be found at places like Whole Foods Markets or at other, sort of, more broadly distributed specialty shops.

SS: So let's talk about the CCMA, the Craft Chocolate Makers of America. They seemed to establish parameters for what craft chocolate was, and I wonder how effective those are right now? This was looking at the size, as you mentioned, of a chocolate making company; the ownership structure, so it was an independent organization; the methods of production, as you'd mentioned, using traditional methods. [CM: Right.] So, looking at that now, are those the best parameters upon which to hinge a definition of craft chocolate?

CM: You know, it's interesting looking at the parameters today. They are primarily technical, and I find that to be significant in a lot of ways. Because, certainly, if you want to define what a craft industry is, it's important to have some kind of technical parameters.

However, they can be tricky in the present day, given the fact that there are now third-party companies, for example, that are producing so-called craft chocolate with putting other people's labels on it and allowing them to then sell it as so-called craft chocolate.

So there are all different kinds of complicating factors that have come out in this. And then, I'm, of course, biased as a social scientist, but I tend to think that some of the most distinguishing parts of what makes something small-scale chocolate, that we might call craft chocolate, is also the social aspect of what's going on.

An approach that is differing in how cacao is sourced, a type of education that is offered by chocolate makers to consumers. There's also a tendency to offer more transparency among these companies.

There's really a lot that is done around sourcing, around storytelling, around educating and marketing that looks quite different than the typical private sector industrial chocolate does. And that is also a key distinguishing feature of craft chocolate.

SS: So if you were going to define craft chocolate in a sentence, what would that definition be?

CM: I don't know that I would do it yet, to be perfectly honest (laughing), and I'm not saying that to be difficult.

But right now, probably what I feel most comfortable with—and this may be, sort of, moving at the speed of academia, rather than at the speed of the industry … I feel most comfortable thinking about these companies as small-scale chocolate makers who engage in craftsmanship and who have a diversity of approaches to sourcing cacao, but, in general, are looking to actually reinvent, or in some ways change, the traditional, opaque supply chain for cacao and chocolate and to drive value toward cacao producers in a way that it has not typically been driven toward them.

SS: You mentioned maybe not everyone would agree. And you also use the term "so-called" when you were talking about other people making chocolate and then having it rebranded as craft. Tell me, you know, while this definition is being developed, we—the consumers—are struggling to make sense of the chocolate aisle [CM: Yes], and I wonder what kind of guidance you can give people around making more informed decisions about purchasing high-quality chocolate.

CM: Keeping in mind that consumers face a big burden, my strongest recommendation is that people look to the companies that are open and transparent about what they're doing—and also the retailers that have taken the time to curate products for them.

One website that I refer people to a lot is the website flavorsofcacao.com, which keeps a relatively updated list of bean-to-bar chocolate makers in North America, and you can actually search by state.

So that's one way that consumers, actually throughout North America—both the U.S. and Canada—can look to find and see if there might be a chocolate maker near them whose business they could get more insight into.

It's also really useful for people to look to companies like Cacao Portland, Chocolopolis, The Chocolate Garage, The Chocolate House. All of these different retailers actually take a great deal of time to curate their collections and to find ways to translate for consumers this very complicated state of the industry. So those are really valuable ways to dig in on all of this.

As consumers become more comfortable with what they're seeing on labels in marketing language, they can better approach, with a critical or skeptical eye, the different types of products that are out there and also learn to better identify those which might match their desire for quality and ethics.

SS: So two final questions. The first, I'm playing a bit of a devil's advocate here, you mentioned Brady's database, but you also mentioned that there are some manufacturers that are creating bars that are so-called craft bars, but maybe aren't really. If you're not able to make that distinction … And if you're telling me you're not comfortable coming up with, sort of, a very terse definition of what craft is, then how is a website like that useful in an area where it's still yet to be defined?

CM: Well, I think the important thing to keep in mind with all of this is that any of these solutions, at present, are moving. They're not static, and they're complex. So there's never going to be necessarily a, sort of, hard-and-fast truth that consumers can really cling to in all of this, at least right now.

And this is the case in many other relevant industries. If we look at craft beer, for example, or smaller scale wine production, cheese, tea, coffee, all of these different industries—the types of injuries that you've surveyed in your book, these are all things that—they're all industries which are constantly defining and redefining themselves.

So, ultimately, becoming comfortable with a certain level of complexity—becoming comfortable with the fact that these aren't, kind of, snapshot photographs of fact and truth that one can take—is necessary to explore any industry.

That applies both to craft chocolate, if that is the term that people end up choosing to go along with as an industry, as well as to mass-manufactured chocolate. There are lots of shades of gray in all of this.

SS: Well, I would argue that there are parameters that are set out for specialty coffee or craft beer that people can go look up that actually do have a meaning, whether they're evolving or not. There's actually something there for consumers to hold onto, with the interchangeability of terms. For example, you mentioned bean-to-bar, or you mentioned small batch, excuse me, mentioned bean-to-bar or artisanal. [CM: Right.] Craft … Do you have any feelings around what term should take precedence as we move forward and try to navigate this terrain?

Is there any particular term you think consumers should look for—or is there any hierarchy in the terms, as they currently exist for you?

CM: Sure. You know, interestingly, a number of scholars have actually worked on this and have looked at especially the terms artisan, heirloom and craft, in relation to chocolate. And what appears, right now, to be a hierarchy is that, if people are looking for these smaller-scale chocolate makers, the term that comes up most commonly is craft. And then the terms that tend to be more, sort of, loosely defined are terms like fine or artisan or even authentic. The term heirloom is then used in different ways often referring to either plant genetics or some sort of historical use, a particular variety of plants.

What is really clear, at least in the research, is that, at this point, consumers tend to be confused about these terms. They are still struggling to make sense of them.

And so what I hope I'm able to convey is that there is a need in the industry to look toward ways of better defining these things—of better giving some sort of scaffolding around which consumers can base their decisions. But that, as these things are done, there needs to always be an eye toward both the technical or more, sort of, scientific side of things and the social science side of things. And that all of that needs to also be done while measuring impact to make sure that the claims the industry is making are actually substantiated.

And that's because, increasingly, we're seeing cynicism among the, sort of, premium side of the consumer market of people who have become turned off by certain types of standards or certifications because they feel that they don't actually deliver the promises that their marketing claims they do.

SS: So, in my interview with Sunita, one of the things that she mentioned was that small didn't necessarily reflect quality. I wondered if you would touch upon that a bit. If that is one of the parameters of craft, one could say, in much the same way fair trade does nothing to address quality, then craft also does nothing to address quality. There are a huge continuum of makers, you know—you mentioned several of them—who've been around for quite a while, and then you have people who've been doing this a couple of months, who, for all intents and purposes, for consumers look the same. So what do you feel about, kind of, the growth of the industry … but because there is no sort of clear oversight or definition, what that actually does to quality?

CM: Sure. It makes quality confusing, at this point in time. It's very clear that there are chocolate makers who have been working to hone their craft for many years now, that there are others who are taking the time to apprentice with people whose work they admire and respect as experts in the industry, that there are others who are working to share knowledge with one another, and that quality is something that comes with practice and experience over time, just as it does in really any field. And that there are also companies that are new to the market that are still learning their craft and that, in many ways, price and marketing don't actually reflect these differences for consumers.

So questions around quality, I think, are essential in this space, as ways to make sure that when marketing quality, that's what's actually part of the value proposition for consumers rather than just, sort of, a promise of quality that doesn't necessarily materialize in the finished product.

And what I would add to all of that is that notions of quality have always existed in cacao and chocolate. And that, at least at present, they have yet to fully take on an understanding of the power inequality that exists in the supply chain. And that, at times, the way that marketing goes in this segment of the market, it suggests that not only are our products made better and do they taste better, but, in fact, they are made better and they taste better because they're better for people.

That might be either better for farmers, with a suggestion that farmers are making more money as a result of being involved with these product lines, or that they're better for consumers, and that consumers might derive better health benefits for them, and so on and so forth.

There may be some elements of truth to this, at times, but it is not always the case. In fact, there is a lot of proof that remains to be seen that there is this element of quality also equaling better ethics.

SS: Awesome. Thank you. Thank you very much for your time, Carla.

CM: Oh, thanks. These are such good questions. I'm so glad you're taking me in on this because it's such a hot issue. And I hope that it's OK that I'm resistant to defining things, but I really, really want for the industry to collaborate to define these things together.

SS: I hear you. I think the challenge, for me, is that in the in the vacuum that is everyone being reluctant to define it [CM: Yes.], every maker is defining it. So you're not defining it, and nobody is defining it. But all these random-shandom makers are defining it. And then consumers are buying it. [CM: Amen.] And really it's a great detriment. It's a great detriment that this is not happening because the people who are paying for it and making that investment will be turned off. You will lose them as well, if there isn't any, sort of, clear trajectory for what this is supposed to be because they hit a couple of bad bars. Then, you know, like, why should I bother, you know? [CM: Agreed.]

Greg D'Alesandre

Chocolate Sourcerer, Dandelion Chocolate

Simran Sethi: Greg, thanks so much for having this conversation with me. You know that I am frustrated that there doesn't seem to be a clear definition of what craft chocolate is for consumers. So can we just explain … Tell me, what does Dandelion use as their working definition of craft?

Greg D'Alesandre: No, I completely understand your frustration. And you can imagine how chocolate makers feel about it as well. We'll clearly get into that. But I completely understand the frustration because just because something is evolving doesn't mean you don't need a stake in the ground to build from. And I think that's an important thing to be able to do.

SS: That is an absolutely brilliant statement. Thank you. So let's back up for one second. Just introduce yourself and then we'll get into the conversation.

GD: OK. Here we go. Hi, I'm Greg D'Alesandre, chocolate sourcerer at Dandelion Chocolate.
And I just first have to say thank you so much for giving me an opportunity to get really, sort of, like, picky about words because normally that makes me a jerk. And then, this time, it makes me helpful. So I very much appreciate you giving me the opportunity.

GD: Before diving into craft, I think it's important to highlight that there are a lot of different words that a lot of people are using. But I believe they're using them all synonymously. [SS: Ooh. Okay.]

The main terms used are craft, bean-to-bar, small batch, and some people would say artisanal, as well, although that's used a lot less often. But the main ones we see are small batch, craft and bean-to-bar.

I actually look at Google Trends to see which ones people are actually searching for, to see what people find interesting. And it seems like right now, bean-to-bar is kind of winning the battle. [SS: Yeah.]

So I think the reason we like the term craft is because of two things. One, it's borrowed from the craft brewers. I think they've given a lot of meaning to the word craft, in the context of modern food. I think people can relate to it because of that. And so that's one part of things.

The other part of things is, I do feel like—I know I was just talking about being picky with words—but I feel like bean-to-bar is very, like, while you can give the term new meaning, it's filled with some meaning because it has very specific words.

And so bean-to-bar. You know, there are plenty of bean-to-bar companies out there. Hershey's is a bean-to-bar company. Mars is a bean-to-bar company.

SS: There we go. Mhmm…

GD: And I don't think those companies are doing something bad. But I think what they're doing is something different. So I think the challenge is, if you say bean-to-bar … Well, it's like, yes, there's lots of companies that start with cocoa beans and end with bars and vice versa. There's a number of companies that will start with liquor or they'll end with chocolate and have someone else temper their bars.

That doesn't mean what they're doing is any less good or less of a craft because that's what they're doing, in our opinion. So I think the challenge I have with using the term bean-to-bar, which we still use sometimes, but I think ... I think it's going to be harder to help people understand what bean-to-bar means than help people understand what craft means, if that makes sense.

SS: It makes total sense, and a concern of mine when I was at the Northwest Chocolate Festival, in particular, was seeing so many smaller makers. I'll use that term just to kind of distinguish from those big companies that you were mentioning earlier. They were using this term synonymously with craft and some of the people who were using it didn't actually have much experience with beans at the source. And I wonder if you feel like that is also something that that is kind of embedded in that definition because, I guess when I think about it I think, like, wow, you know, a company like Mars has been around a lot longer, has intimate relationships with farming cooperatives or with large scale farms, and they travel to origin. They are more maybe "bean-to-bar" in a sense than some of these emerging makers who don't have that point of reference.

GD: Very much so. I think that is exactly part of why bean-to-bar gets confusing, which is why we tend to try to use craft rather than bean-to-bar in most of our conversations. The other term small batch … you know, I, like, I hate to say it: It's literally part of our logo.

And I don't … It's possible we helped popularize it. But now, in retrospect, I feel like small batch is probably the least useful of the terms. But, you know, it is what it is at this point.

I think the point of all of these terms is they're trying to get at something that that we … A number of chocolate makers got together in June of this year to try to form a craft chocolate manifesto—manifesto being a sort of definition of what craft chocolate is that we can all get behind.

So there's clearly, like, people want a definition. There's all these people getting together and trying to make a definition, like, why? And so, I think, before getting to—you're going to be super irritated because I'm not going

to get to a definition until almost the end … [SS: Oh no, that's cool.] But I'll get there, I promise.

SS: Before we move forward, will you define small batch for me, and let's dissect the way we did [GD: Sure.] in bean-to-bar real quick, and then I definitely want to hear about the manifesto and the journey.

GD: I think what small batch means is that rather than using, rather than making … Now I'm going to sound like a simpleton but … rather than making very large sets of chocolate the way industrial manufacturers were, or are, making batches of chocolate where you're using a small enough set of beans that there is going to end up being variation from batch to batch because you're not homogenizing multiple tons of beans together into, you know, the sort of batch size that you're using.

To me, small batch is about saying … Industrial chocolate makers have a variety of sizes of equipment and machines and the ways they make chocolate. But often multiple-ton batches are not, you know, unusual or unheard of or even larger. So, I think, part of the reason we started using it is this concept of making batches under 100 kilos versus many tons makes a difference. And when I say it makes a difference, it makes a difference because it means that you're going to have variation in batch, from batch to batch. And that variation is actually something, rather than being something people are unhappy about, that's actually kind of interesting and desired.

SS: When you talk about small batch, you're talking about each round of production working with—I want to clarify this because I think it might vary even across makers—but you're talking about working with a smaller set of beans, not necessarily with the amount of production that you are creating, which, of course, has been on a steady growth trajectory since Dandelion was founded?

GD: Exactly. It's that each batch of chocolate is made on a small scale. Not that the overall sum of … It's why people are calling themselves nano-batch makers and pico-batch makers and micro-batch makers, because it's sort of like you can use a 60-kilo mélangeur, or you can use a four-kilo mélangeur, or you can use a one-kilo mélangeur.

So I think the people who have—like, you know Arete who, last I knew, had an army of small one-kilo mélangeurs. You know, he's sort of, like, "Hey, if you really love the difference, I have, like, even smaller batches and so that's something that you really like. You know, you might like my chocolate even more." And I totally get where they're coming from.

What they're saying is if that is something you find intriguing, then it's worth highlighting that some people are doing it on an even smaller scale.

SS: The Craft Chocolate Makers of America, the CCMA, definition was one that, in many ways, paralleled what we see in craft beer, where it was around the scale of production. And then, of course, you look at, you know, someone like Alex Whitmore in Taza where he would no longer fall under the definition that he had been part of creating.

GD: Yeah absolutely, absolutely. So now before the CCMA stopped meeting, I went to a number of meetings, and I think one of the challenges is: Why do we need a definition? What's the definition for?

I think some people wanted the definition because they wanted to be more closely associated with some chocolate makers than other chocolate makers. Like, to be frank, there are some chocolate makers who wanted to be more closely associated with Askinosie than they wanted to be closely associated with Lindt. And, again, I'm not saying there's anything wrong with Lindt, but I think people feel like, "What I do is more similar to Askinosie than to Lindt."

Now the interesting part about that is: What do you mean by more similar? Because, as you said, one could argue Dandelion—where we go to origin … you know, I spend half my year going to origin—is maybe more similar to Valrhona than it is to chocolate makers whose focus is on, like, the specific equipment they're using and how that equipment works. So defining 'similar to' is hard. Also, Taza's style of chocolate, which is this sort of stone-

ground style, I think, is very different from Dandelion style of chocolate. But I think our sourcing approach and the way we approach running the business is very similar.

So actually what got everyone really caught up in trying to define craft chocolate in CCMA is that there are people who are sort of, from outward appearances, if you looked at the labels, seem more similar … But do people buy chocolate because of the way it's sourced? Or do they buy it because of the way it tastes? Or do they buy it because of the texture? It's very hard to know.

The reality is, I think, everyone buys it for different reasons. And so trying to group and categorize a set of people together because of, like, the scale of their production seems like a bad way to go. Or, I think, in the end, to me, seems like a bad way to go.

I think the core of what people are—what our customers are—interested in and the core of what the makers are trying to do is we are deindustrializing. You know, when the Industrial Revolution came around and everyone said, "Wait a minute, every time I buy a shirt from the same guy making shirts, it doesn't have to fit differently? We can homogenize things? We can take these very different products out there—now what one might call commodities—and homogenize them, make them all the same? And then I can get exactly the same thing every time," was super exciting at some point in the world. And everyone's like, "Oh, this is awesome." And so now all anyone wanted was every single time they bought something, they wanted it to be exactly the same. [SS: Right.]

I think now there's a reaction back against that, where people are like "Whoa, I don't actually want something that's always the same all the time. You know, nature has variety in it, and I think that variety is actually kind of cool."

I think part of what craft and small batch and bean-to-bar—all is this reaction against, rather than trying to make a product that is always exactly the same. When you eat a Hershey's bar now versus eating a Hershey's bar 20 years ago, part of their goal, I believe, is to give you the same experience.

And let me be super clear: That is much, much, much harder than what I think a lot of us as craft chocolate makers are doing because you try to remove this variety and make it always the same. You know, it is challenging because there's inherent variety in cocoa beans, which all of us can tell you.

SS: (laughing) It's an agricultural product. It, like, grows in the earth.

It's amazing we commoditized [GD: Right.] crops. And it's so interesting when you mentioned that … I interviewed Lisa Schroeder from Mars for the show, and there is a whole chain of command that helps that process along to ensure that consistency. You know, I kind of assumed it would just be a small team of, like, sensory analysts. And she's like, "Oh, no, no." (laughing) [GD: No, no.] "There are people before me and after me."

SS: I can just envision what you said—how incredibly difficult it is to sustain that consumer experience of consistency. [GD: Exactly.] You know, as much as it is, it's an asset, I would say, to craft chocolate makers to really enhance that diversity, and to say, "Listen, we're working with a crop."

It's not fungible; we can't just interchange it all the time and call it one thing. It's multiple. [GD: Exactly.] For consumers, you know, in many ways you're asking them to take on a different kind of journey and a different kind of commitment to this product.

GD: Exactly. You get it exactly because this isn't just about the way we make the chocolate. It's about the sort of de-commoditization of cacao. Commodities are like … they all cost, and you know there's a world market price. The reason there was a world market price is the assumption is all cacao is worth exactly the same amount of money. And it's just not true. In our opinion, it's just not true.

I guess 99 percent of the world would disagree with me. But in our opinion, it's not true because every bean is different. You know, every cacao producer is putting a different sort of focus and a different spin on what they're

producing and how they're producing it.

To essentially say every cacao is just like every other cocoa bean is, I believe, both inaccurate and also underplays the role that cacao producers had in trying to make this really complex product as consistent as possible—and it's really hard. I'm really impressed that cacao producers are able to do the job that they do.

At one point, you had asked this question of sort of, like: There's two bars on the shelf and one of them … You know, I'm traveling all over the world all the time to meet with producers and try to figure out how we can get great beans and how we can build good relationships and make them win-wins, and to be next to a bar that is mass-marketed and has really nice packaging, but is made at this huge scale …

And I would argue we don't try to convince people to buy our chocolate because of the effort we put into it. We are trying to make a product we think people will really enjoy. And so, honestly, if somebody enjoys a bar that's made at a massive scale, it has been made that way for 100 years. If they like that better than our chocolate, I'm excited for them. I'm excited for anyone to find a chocolate bar that they feel has been really great.

I think the thing that gets a little tricky is—OK, if that's the case, the question then gets down to sort of: Is that bar fair for everyone? And that's a whole separate question. So I think rather than attacking it from the angle of, "You should buy our chocolate and enjoy chocolate because we're trying to do it in the right way …"

We're trying to make a product people love and then they will sort of, you know, coincidentally and happily, be like, "Oh! And I enjoy the way this company produces their product and sort of the ethics behind it, etc.," because I feel I've seen too many situations of people essentially focusing so heavily on this sort of ethics of what they're doing that the experience of the product ends up taking a back seat. And then you end up … I mean, we're at the beginning, in my opinion, of sort of the craft chocolate movement.

And so what ends up happening is you, sort of, almost spoil the movement because people are like, "Oh, I get it. Craft chocolate means it's not that great, but I can feel better about buying it."

SS: Right, virtue halo. Yeah.

GD: Yeah, exactly. And that will destroy the perception of, like—no, craft chocolate's this amazing … And I think craft beer is a great job of this. Craft beer is not like, "I feel better about it because I know the guy who made it, but it's not very good." Craft is like, "No, no, no, this is awesome; this tastes great." And you can feel really great, about how it's been produced and who you're buying from and all these things.

I think for craft chocolate to succeed, it has to have that same sense that it has to be like, "This is a great product. And, oh, look at that, it's super cool the way they make it." You know?

SS: Well, and one of the other questions I posed to you was also that—on the shelf, the pretty packaging is going to stand out. Let's just talk about the emerging … you're talking about the emerging craft chocolate movement. There's also, alongside of that, an emerging consumer base for craft chocolate.

And [GD: Yes.] when there's one bar made by a relatively new maker who doesn't have any experience at origin, who may just be gearing up with his or her equipment, right beside another bar made from somebody who has maybe a lot more experience and a bar that you know—everybody's flavor experience is different but I'll just say—has made a qualitatively superior bar …

There is no way for a consumer to discern what is what. So they're either going to go, quite likely, with something that's familiar, so that has name recognition, or they're going to go with a packaging that's quite alluring to them. Neither of those things get us to that place of what you said, which is: This is going to be a superior taste experience. Because they could pick up a bar, you know, from someone on a learning curve and have a terrible experience, and it would take us right back to that place of like, [GD: Yep.] "Oh well, I guess craft chocolate is just this kind of weird mediocre thing."

I mean, you know, we could kind of compare it to something like natural wine where the idea was, "It's funky and it's weird and I mean, OK, some people like it, but it's not for me." [GD: Yeah, totally.]

I feel very strongly that I don't want to lose people because the chocolate offered within craft chocolate is quite different from mass-produced chocolate—quite extraordinary in many manifestations, but also quite variable.

GD: Well, and, you know, it's like you could write our business model for us, but this is actually exactly why we have retail shops. Because I think with retail shops, people can come in and they can taste the chocolate.

It's not just packaging that they're trying to judge their experience on. And so we genuinely feel like giving people an opportunity to taste the chocolate is the best way to help them, sort of, make that decision. But you know, honestly, part of what craft chocolate means is massive amounts of education—of people understanding chocolate.

First of all, people understanding that chocolate comes from cocoa beans which … [SS: You know I feel you on that.] (laughing) I mean, the vast majority of people in the world have no idea.

And, in fact, I'm sure you've seen the videos of cocoa farmers trying chocolate for the first time. But we've talked to people who … You know, there are farmers who thought that cocoa beans went to make—what was it? They thought cocoa beans …

Man, I'm totally blanking on it now, but they thought cocoa beans went to make some totally different, random other product. [SS: Yeah, yeah.] You know, and so I think the amount of education in the world of helping people understand. And now I'm starting to talk faster because I know it's a short podcast.

SS: And we haven't even gotten to the definition yet.

GD: We're going to get there. We're going to get there. But I think an enormous amount of education is necessary, and this is actually something that happened with a lot of the large producers. A lot of the large chocolate producers tried to make single-origin chocolate in the mid- to late 90s. They put it on the shelves, and no one knew what in the world it was, right? This concept of, like, you put something on a shelf next to something called special dark. This is called Madagascar. Or even worse: This is called Papua New Guinea.

You know, a place that fewer people might have even heard of. And they're like, "So I know what a special dark is. What in the world is a Papua New Guinea?" You know, people buy this special dark and so one of the things I think we very early on sort of decided is you can't build a chocolate company—a craft chocolate company—without also helping to just educate people on what in the world this is.

This is why we do classes; this is why we do trips and tours. We have a sourcing report. We do all these things because we feel like an educated consumer … It's not about trying to convince everyone to buy our chocolate. It's about helping people understand what it is that they're buying. And then once they know what it is they're buying, I think everyone will be happier because they feel like they can make informed decisions.

I think my perspective, and I might be crazy, is that everyone would love to make informed decisions. I think the challenge is informed decisions take an enormous amount of time and effort to get informed.

And so I think what often happens is people will, instead, make decisions based on packaging—based on what they see—and often are sort of shy or embarrassed about doing this. But they shouldn't be. It's our job as an industry to educate people. You know, as much as it is their job to, sort of, find that information themselves, if that makes sense.

SS: It makes total sense, and it's always frustrating to me when chocolate makers are unwilling to go on that journey as well, you know, and to claim some of that responsibility because consumers can only know what they know. [GD: Exactly.] And that kind of falls that way to me. I'm a journalist, right, so I'm in between both of you with no other goal than to build an informed consumer base, which I think will ultimately help transform

the industry.

So for people who don't live in San Francisco or Japan and can't get to a Dandelion store, what do the rest of us do?

GD: So they listen to your podcast. You know, we're writing a book right now where we talk about a lot of this. Our book is not about the history of Dandelion. Our book is about understanding chocolate and how it's made and where beans come from.

And, you know, the complexity of that and how the equipment works and how to work with that chocolate, how to bake with full fat chocolate. So that you're not … You know, if the only thing you ever used in your baking is cocoa powder, you have really severely narrowed the flavor profiles of what [SS: Right.] you're putting into the things you make. [SS: Yeah.] Nobody bakes … not nobody … Most people don't bake with full fat chocolate. [SS: Yeah.] And so one of the things we're trying to get out there is, like, here's how to do it. It's different, but you can still do it.

And so, part of it, you know we're doing a book right now to try to help with that. I think one of our challenges, this year in particular, is trying to figure out how to do a better job of educating a larger group that we won't be able to meet with in person. You know, we have our chocolate one-on-one, which sort of takes people through a variety of, like, tasting all the ingredients and tasting chocolate from other makers.

We have people taste chocolate from Charm School Chocolate and from Åkesson's and from Askinosie and from Patric, and from a lot of these other chocolate makers, who are making things that are not what we make. And so, to give people an experience of—here is a lot of the things that are out there. But how do you do that at scale? Well we're going to try to figure it out because it needs to get figured out.

SS: I'll ask one more time because all of that still ties back to Dandelion and the specificity of being able to be in close proximity to you or in the book, which I can't wait to see and read. What do we do today? What does a consumer do when they approach an increasingly cluttered shelf of chocolate to start to make a direct … a decision that moves them toward something—I don't even know what word to use here—crafty? delicious? specialized? educational?

GD: So I can say what I do. [SS: Yeah.] Which is, you know, most of us have smartphones. It's not that hard to go to a website. What I usually do if there's a brand I've never heard of—which, luckily, is getting increasingly rare (but I'm hoping there's going to be more brands I've never heard of)—I go to the website.
And I try to understand what they're talking about. Are they talking about beans and where they come from? And that can give you a hint of, you know, are they working with beans? Because the other challenge is there's lots of things that taste good. A lot of it is chocolatiers who worked with chocolate, which, again, is not a bad thing. But it depends on what you're trying to buy—if what you're trying to buy is chocolate that you feel excited about where the beans come from.

You feel confident that the people who grew these beans are getting treated fairly and paid appropriately. Then, I literally just pop on the websites in the store. I think people try to cram a lot of writing onto bars, but I think it's really hard because then it's like the most spin of the spin.

But I would also say go to things like the Northwest Chocolate Festival where there's lots of chocolate makers there who you can talk to. Honestly, go into the specialty markets that are out there. In San Francisco, we, again, have a bunch of really great ones. But all over the country, there's really great—Chocolopolis in Seattle is an amazing one, and you can go there and talk to Lauren and she will tell you all about all these different makers. And so, I think, the biggest challenge is if you go into a store and there's no one there to help you and you're looking at this wall of chocolate. What do you do? The main thing I would do is—the main thing I *do*—is look for the word "beans."

Honestly, just like look and see if you see the word "beans" anywhere on the packaging, because normally people who work with beans tend to say the word "beans." I've just said beans, like, 20 times, seriously.

SS: That's so great, I can't tell you … Because when the answer is, "Go to a specialty shop," it, again, limits us to a handful of cities [GD: No, no. I know.] So I love what you're saying. Thank you.

GD: The first thing I'm going to do is go back to our packaging and be like, "Do we say 'beans' on our packaging?" [SS: (laughs) Quick!] Yeah, put "beans" on there. [SS: Oh my gosh. Anywhere!] Just write it in, just like scrawl it at the bottom. [SS: (Cracking up) Exactly.] And trust me, it's going to work! Like, I know it's going to work; it's going to be amazing.

And that's why, on our packaging, we not only talking about beans, but we talk about who made it. What we're trying to do is connect you to what it is that we're doing in as few words as possible because, I'll be totally frank, my belief—and I don't have good data to support this—but my belief is 50 percent of the time, people are buying chocolate because of the packaging. [SS: Yeah.]

The way we look at it is people buy chocolate because of the packaging the first time; they buy chocolate because of the flavor the second time. So, you know, when you're looking at a wall in a store, you're just buying what looks good. And I don't blame you. That is natural and human. Then you bring it home and try. If it tastes good, you're going to be like, "Oh, I'm going to remember this."

You can watch people who try a chocolate for the first time, like, turn the wrapper back over and study it, and you can almost see the words of the name of that company getting branded into their brain. And so I think what we're trying to do is make packaging that is appealing enough that people will pick it up for the first time. We say "beans" on our packaging, I think. And then, you know, if it tastes good, they'll want to buy it again.

The other thing is also: Chocolate is a gift. We did a case study with the University of Chicago Booth Business School. I talked to the class and it was really interesting because there was a guy there who said, "Yeah, you know, I got your chocolate as a gift once, and I just thought it was so awesome and I really, really loved it." And I was like, "Oh, that's amazing. Thank you." And he's like, "Now I buy it for gifts for my friends all the time." I'm like, "That's great."

I was like, "Do you like buy it and eat it?" He's like, "Nope, never. But I buy it as gifts for other people all the time." So I think there's something we don't totally understand about chocolate because I think there is a set of people like … I think a lot of people love chocolate. But I think there's a set of people who it's a gift. It's like you don't buy chocolate for yourself. You get chocolate as a gift or you give chocolate as a gift, but buying it for yourself is—you know, there's something, like, untoward about that. And so the packaging, I think, is really important.

Alan of Patric Chocolate, at one point, said, "One of the main things people want to do when they're buying chocolate is not look like a jerk." Right. I think people don't want to be the person buying the bar that someone says, like, "I just read a report that that is made with child slaves. I can't believe you bought me that bar."

I think there's an aspect that people are trying to buy something … I think, ideally, they'd like to be proud of it. But I think, realistically, are hoping not to be embarrassed, like, if they're buying it as a gift. But we have to get to the definition of craft.

SS: Yes. Yes.

GD: OK, here. I'm going to do it. So we've talked about … it's all about the industrialization, etc. Now when we talked with this group of chocolate makers, we disagreed about an enormous number of things about what craft chocolate is.

But I think what, fundamentally, craft chocolate is is chocolate made with specialty cacao. And I know I use the term specialty, not fine flavor, very specifically. We don't have time to get into it, but there's a reason for that. Huh? There's a teaser.

SS: There is. There is and again that rabbit hole, but absolutely.

GD: Yeah. So chocolate made with specialty cacao that is processed with care. And I know this is a super vague … like, then what does care mean? [SS: Right.] But I think what you really get to is—you're using cocoa beans that you've chosen specifically either for their flavor or their ethics or something—but you're not using commodity cocoa—and you're making it with some level of interest and care in the process.

So this is not craft chocolate, but a craft chocolate maker … is openness and transparency. I think one of the big differences between craft chocolate makers and a lot of the industrial makers who have been out there in the world is: Craft chocolate makers tend to have—it's not always true, but—many fewer, sort of, trade secrets that they're working with. And they don't want to talk to other people about it. Much like craft beer, craft chocolate makers tend to talk to each other a lot, share a lot of information, share a lot of secrets. And so, while that's not craft chocolate, part of a craft chocolate maker, in my opinion, is also this sort of openness and transparency and community.

SS: Well sure. Absolutely. But also shorter supply chains, oftentimes very similar sourcing, you know, outlet. So you're sourcing from a handful of suppliers that we could probably rattle off right now, unless you're doing it directly.

There's so much overlap and commonality, but I want to ask a little bit more about care. Because you know what the implication is—is that a company like Valrhona or Mars or Hershey's or fill in the blank doesn't care and there isn't oversight. But, yet, of course we've talked about kind of what goes into maintaining consistency and how hard it is.

GD: So, honestly, this was one of the biggest debates we got into. People were like, "Yeah, but Valrhona use specialty cacao, and they put a lot of care into their process; that would make them craft chocolate." And there's this part of me that's like, "Well, to some degree, I think there's some truth to that."

Frankly, I know Valrhona will often pay very good prices. You know, they sourced from some of the similar people we sourced from, and they pay good prices for a lot of their cacao. And they put a ton of effort into working with and helping to develop the producers they work with. They make very good chocolate. They do put a lot of care into it. And so, to some degree, I actually don't feel like it's weird or I should feel bad buying a Valrhona bar. I actually feel proud buying a Valrhona bar because I actually think they're doing a really good thing at a really large scale, which is insanely hard. So I think this is where it gets really tricky.

So that's why I specifically use the term care because, without getting into a value judgment, I, like … If I'm going to get into a value judgment, what I would say is part of the heart of craft chocolate versus the term I use instead is industrial chocolate, but I think that misses the gray you know middle ground … But part of the difference between craft chocolate and industrial chocolate is that industrial chocolate is made because they believe they can make money off it. Craft chocolate is made because you believe in the product.

So, again, I'm not trying to get into, like, you should buy it because there's passion behind it. But I think fundamentally when there's that gut feeling of, "Is this a craft chocolate maker or not?" And the question comes up all the time. People ask it all the time.

Part of what I realized in my gut I'm evaluating is: Are they doing this because they're like, "I'll bet we can make a bunch of money off of chocolate?" Or are they doing this because there's some aspect of chocolate, whether it's working with farmers or it's making a product people love—or there's some aspect of making that product that they're doing because they care about the product, not just because they think it can make them money?

Does it make sense?

SS: It makes sense. I mean, I find it quite a controversial statement because I think …

GD: Are you kidding me? It's insanely controversial idea.

SS: It puts a value judgment, like you said. And I would argue the way it's framed, what it makes it sound like is craft chocolate makers are indulging in a hobby and they don't need to make a living, which I know is not true.

And then we know so many people working at large chocolate companies who care very deeply about farmers, about the supply chain, and all of us—I mean, I know you're maybe a little bit younger than I am—but we were raised eating that chocolate. The first chocolate we tasted was an industrial chocolate bar most likely, and so that's where our love affair started.

GD: And let me clarify. I was not saying that somebody who is making chocolate because they sort of love the product doesn't need to build a business. I think it's a question of priorities. It's sort of like, frankly, there are better ways to make money than making chocolate.

And so I think most craft chocolate makers have chosen to make chocolate not because they think it's the best way they can make money, but because there is some aspect about it that they feel like it's what they want to do. And I'm totally, totally with you. Again, I have tons of respect. I talk to large chocolate makers all the time, and I have an enormous amount of respect for what they do. I sort of was raised on it as well.

I think the challenge is often, as a company, there are people in the company who clearly care super, super deeply about it. The question is, as a company, why are they doing it? Not necessarily for each individual in the company, but what is the, sort of, the kind of optimization of why this product has been made.

And I very much appreciate you pushing on this because, as I said, I've been having this conversation for five years, and we haven't gotten to an answer that makes everyone happy. So that's why I think the best we can do right now is it uses specialty—I do think that's critical and important—and it's made with care.

Now, I think the problem that you highlighted … is that implies a wider set of people could be considered craft chocolate makers.

I think the question is: Is that bad?

SS: Or that people who are making large-scale chocolate are careless, which I think is a greater concern. You know, that those who are making a Mars bar, or whatever kind it is, do not care. If, by default, what you do is care.

GD: You know, OK, maybe you're right. Maybe then care is not … Because I'm not saying that they don't care.

GD: I think it's a different optimization that there may be. [SS: Right.] Well, and part of the thing I'm trying to do is trying not to say, like, "Dandelion's good," because part of what we think is fundamental about our chocolate and craft chocolate is the thing I sort of started with, which is that you're sort of highlighting the nuances and the differences in your ingredients rather than trying to homogenize—rather than trying to make something that is consistent all the time.

The challenge I have with strictly defining craft chocolate that way is that, in many ways, there are craft chocolate makers who are trying to homogenize and are not trying to, you know … Again, the thing they care the most about is their interaction with farmers. And this is where you get back to, like, in my gut, I still feel like they're craft chocolate makers even though the thing they care the most about is their interaction with farmers, and what they're trying to make is a consistent product all the time.

SS: Right. Which gets us to TCHO or Theo…

GD: Exactly, exactly, exactly. And so it doesn't mean that what they're doing is … Again, that's why I try to steer away from value judgments in general on this because there's an enormous number of people … Like, does every single person who works at Dandelion care more than every single person? No!

SS: Exactly!

GD: And I wasn't trying to imply that. It is like, this is what, I think, everyone's been trying to distill over the course of the last five years is, like, what is it? And, to some degree, part of what people are trying to distill is people are trying to make themselves as craft chocolate makers.

They're trying to differentiate themselves. They're trying to say, look, my economics are really bad on this. And so I have to charge $10 a chocolate bar to make my economics even vaguely work out. You know, Valrhona can do this at scale and make a much cheaper bar. So I think part of what's going on is sort of, like, how do we say what we're doing is new and different, if so many aspects of what we're doing is so similar to what so many other people are already doing?

This is why, to some degree, I think I personally care less about defining craft chocolate as I do about defining, sort of, the way the companies behave. Like the openness and transparency, I think, is really, to me, fundamental of who we are as Dandelion and who the companies that I think we are most similar to also behave.

Now the controversial part of that … so I've made, like, 19 controversial statements …

SS: I could push back on all of it or embrace all of it. I love it.

GD: No, no, no, no, no. And I think we should do both. I think we should push back on all of it and embrace it. But I think the pushback I got when I talk about that is people like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." But there are some people who are, like, totally opaque and don't talk about their process, but make great chocolate that I consider craft chocolate. So are you somehow excluding those people from craft chocolate just because they won't let other chocolate makers into their factory? And I think my feeling on that is no, I'm not trying to say they're *not* craft chocolate makers.

But what I am saying is I don't feel as much of a kinship with them as I do with the chocolate makers who are open and transparent about what they're doing. Because I genuinely feel, if you watch what happened to the craft beer industry, the people who were closed and didn't want to talk to other people, for the most part, did not survive because … I think it was Steve DeVries who said it—that, you know, if you're going … technically, I think Steve DeVries was repeating something someone else said, but I'm going to credit Steve.

SS: No, no, thank you for doing that. We get into a lot of trouble when people don't reveal the original source.

GD: Oh, yeah, no. Trust me, I want to give people credit where credit is due.

Steve talked about, like, in the craft beer industry, they often talk about, like, if you want to be opaque as a company, you have to be not just smarter than each other company, but smarter than all of the other companies combined. And it's just silly. Like, you're not going to be.

And so if you want things to move forward and things to grow, you should engage with other people because it's just the smart thing to do. Right, it's like you're all just going to grow faster if you work together than if you work separately. There's lots of chocolate makers that make amazing chocolate and don't let other chocolate makers in the factory, and I don't think that somehow makes me like think they make worse chocolate.

It just makes me feel like, OK, well, why don't I focus my time and effort on who I want to talk to of the people who are excited to be open and transparent about what they're doing? And the same, frankly, is true about cacao producers as chocolate makers. The cacao producers who are super open and transparent I gravitate toward more than the ones who, sort of, don't want to talk about what they're doing.

But the question is: Does this help with the definition of craft chocolate for consumers?

SS: Well, can I ask, before we move on … [GD: Sure] I mean, everything you just mentioned about transparency … Just over a year ago, a company that is extremely well known, Mast Brothers, was called out for

this very thing. I mean, one could argue that Mast was one of the most well-known craft chocolate makers, and they are still flourishing despite the fact that there was some shrouding of information, shall we say.

GD: Yeah. Well, so I think that that's absolutely true. And I feel like they had. So, I'll be totally frank. I don't know the Mast brothers well, and so I'm not a good person to talk to about what's happening. The thing that I can say is it was really interesting watching the reaction to what was going on.

There was one article that I think was really insightful that said, like, they felt like part of their reaction to be totally clear. I think what the Mast brothers did was, when they were getting started, they weren't totally clear, you know, on their packaging, etc., about what they're doing. Because the fact that they re-melted chocolate, to me, is not a sin. People do it all the time. I think what was interesting is that what people felt like when they were reading about it is they felt like they were betrayed.

They felt like they were told one story and got another story. And I think that response, to me, was more telling than anything because I think it was … People are nervous about authenticity. I think there's so much marketing and spin going on that when people hear a story, they're excited that it's something they feel like might be really great. But I think they're also kind of waiting for the other shoe to drop.

And I think, to some degree, part of the reason there were a lot of stories written about Mast Brothers and that incident was because, for a lot of people, it was the other shoe that dropped, you know? So, to me, I think the reaction was more about how people themselves were feeling than necessarily what specifically Mast Brothers had done—because I never felt like they were trying to be secretive or they're trying to be opaque.

I think early on, you know, I'll be totally frank about Dandelion. Like right now, we visit all the producers that we work with because we [don't have certifications]. But the first sets of beans that we got in our first year, I honestly have no idea where a lot of those beans came from. We were experimenting. We were trying to figure out how stuff worked. And so we would buy beans often from Chocolate Alchemy, which is a great source of beans.

But did I know this specific farm that those specific beans from Chocolate Alchemy came from? Sometimes I just didn't know. I don't want people to feel like now that we say that we're doing that—that in our first year they're like, "You never visited that farm you used the beans from for that one bag of beans in your first year." It's true, we didn't. And so I think the challenges, as you were saying, like, there's … transparency is really important, but I also think it's … I don't know, I'm rambling now, but …

SS: Well just because you had said, like, transparency—that's what's so great about this. And then I just wanted to say, well, in this one instance, a company that is well-known was called out for not being transparent. So there's still, I guess, a lot of complexity here around who's a craft chocolate maker, who isn't, what it is, and what it isn't. And consumers will just kind of have to navigate carefully.

GD: Yeah, and it's true: There's an enormous amount of complexity. And I think the other challenge with transparency is, to some degree, it's an all or nothing game. Like you're either transparent about everything or you're not. Because if you're transparent about some things, you end up in these situations that—I think, to some degree, this is kind of what happened with the Mast brothers is they're very transparent about a lot of things.

But so then when there's something that people don't see, or don't hear about, then they get suspicious because it's one of those things. Like, if you talk about everything, you're transparent about everything. But then there's something that people don't know about …

And this is why, for instance, part of what we're trying to do as we build all of our factories is … part of our, sort of, fundamental principles is these people can visit all of the factories that we're building.

We don't want any of them to be secret, off someplace where it's difficult to get to or we say like, "I'm so sorry. You just can't see that place." Because, fundamentally, if you know, it might be nice to say, "Oh, there's this cute

little factory on Valencia Street that's making chocolate. But I hear, you know, somewhere in Iowa, there's some huge Dandelion factory that is just churning out chocolate."

It feels disingenuous, you know? And this is what I mean about transparency. You can't be like, "You can tour this factory, but not this other factory." That's worse than not being transparent at all because now it feels like you're being disingenuous, not just opaque.

So I hope I got you closer to an answer about craft chocolate. If not, you know, it's a complex topic. [SS: Yeah.] But I think one of the maybe one step closer is specialty cacao. Craft chocolate is made with specialty cacao.

SS: So give us the 30-second definition of specialty cacao.

GD: Specialty cacao is—you know where it comes from. A fair price is paid for it. And it tastes good.

And I know … each one of those things you can then drill into, like, "What's a fair price? [SS: Of course.] When you say you know where it comes from, what does that actually mean? Do you know each tree that it comes from? Or do you know who grew it? Or do you know where it was fermented? And, you know, tastes good—according to who?

But I think that's part of what you have to do with definitions, is you have to … I think if you define it too narrowly, then it's useless because it's like, so this one company fits this super narrow definition that you made. And I think, to some degree, this was some of the challenge with the CCMA is that the definition was intended to be very narrow. But in making it narrow, it meant all we ever did is try to debate, well, what does this mean, and who, as you said …

Does that mean Taza, who is one of the founding members of the CCMA, can't be a member? So I think if you get caught up in trying to define things so narrowly that you have precision, you then end up sort of missing the forest for the trees. And so I think leaving people up to their interpretation—for instance, what is good flavor?—because some people like different things. And what is a fair price? Because, to some degree, I think if someone says, "We pay a fair price," they should be able to back that up. And the question is: Do they feel like what they're paying is a fair price, as well? And do you know is this something I think that … Man, you could do a whole podcast …

SS: Exactly. We actually have. (laughs)

Art Pollard

Founder and Head Chocolate Maker, Amano Artisan Chocolate

Simran Sethi: Hi, Art. How are you doing? How are you feeling?

Art Pollard: Good, good. I just pulled into Las Vegas.

SS: Oh, wow. Wow.

AP: So just let me get to this red light, and I'll pull into a gas station and find a place to park.

SS: This craft question is … Everybody has a very strong opinion, which is understandable.

AP: That goes for anything in life. Even if you're an artist or, you know, a painter or a sculptor, auto mechanic or whatever, you need to find your own vision and pursue that vision.

SS: Exactly. And I think it's interesting because, you know, we can see examples where makers are using the same source for the same cacao from the same origin, and you see the artistry or the mastery or the creativity, what have you, is revealed in how they interpret that product [AP: Yeah.] and what they make of it.

So I can see how there doesn't have to be any competition there because everyone will, kind of, express those, let's just say Camino Verde beans, in their own unique way. [AP: Right.]

OK so let's … Are you stationary? Can I hop into these questions?

AP: I am. I am. I better be stationary because I've got a light post right in front of me stationary. (both laugh) [SS: Please be stationary.] So, otherwise, if I'm not stationary now, I will be.

SS: So I had asked you a year ago what craft chocolate meant, and you responded, "I think craft implies there is a level of artistry involved in what is being created." [AP: Yeah.]

SS: "It also implies that chocolate is produced in a smaller scale than the industrial chocolate companies. As time goes on, it speaks to me in regards to artistic freedom and creativity than it does size. Artistic freedom and creativity is something that is lost so often in industrial processes, and is, in my mind, what makes us human."

AP: Right.

SS: Is there anything that you would update about that definition now?

AP: No, not really. I mean, I do think that large companies can exhibit that artistic level, but quite frequently that just gets lost in focus groups.

SS: There we go. And I think that sort of 'je ne sais quoi' is what does separate. I mean, it's a very distinguishing factor that is almost also a little bit elusive. It comes down to something that can't be quantified, per say.

AP: No, it can't.

SS: Yeah. I think that heart or that, you know, I don't know how to say—what shines through. But it really is like a different quality of commitment and a life story embedded in that. When I met you in Dominican Republic and you kind of bounded up and you know you would been to these places and you were elated to share this chocolate that came from an origin that you had found and a relationship that you had forged so it wasn't just filling out an order form.

It was like an actual blood and sweat and time and money commitment [AP: Right.] You know, that, I think, is really revealed in the quality of the work. And the quality of the work in your instance ends up being the taste, you know, the flavor—the real depth of, kind of, expression that's there.

AP: Mhmm, mhmm. [SS: Yeah.]

AP: Yeah. Yeah. And as I've looked at our stuff versus a lot of other people's stuff, I think there is a certain magic that we've been able to encapsulate in the flavor. [SS: Yeah.]

And the only thing I can think of is the difference is, is our, like, hearts for lack of a better term. [SS: Yeah.]

So you're really talking about an industry being built on the cream of the cream. [SS: Yeah.] And I said, you know, you can have one farm and it's really good, and one farm right next door to it is really bad. And they made an interesting comment: They said, "That's interesting because in the coffee world, everything from the same region has approximately the same quality."

SS: Well, and also you can do micro-fermentations and not disrupt quality in coffee [AP: Yeah.], which you can't

do with cocoa at this point. [AP: Yeah.]

AP: So that's an interesting, sort of, departure between the two.

SS: Yeah, for sure. So tell me this …

AP: I mean, I find it all very exciting, but [SS: Yeah.] I just don't see how. And the other side of it, too, is what happens when people get bad quality cocoa.

SS: That's my concern. Or actually, to take it to the full extent, what happens when consumers get bad craft chocolate and now they've decided that craft chocolate is horrible because they got a bar from someone who's been doing it for two months instead of someone who's been doing it, you know, for over a decade? [AP: Yeah.]

That is very troubling and makes me actually quite angry because it's—this is money, this is an investment in time and energy people are making, and they have no guidance on how to navigate an increasingly cluttered chocolate aisle, you know? (laughs)

AP: Right, right. Well, yeah and, you know, people make this wine comparison. You can go into Whole Foods; they've got a whole aisles of wines. [SS: Yeah.] But you're never going to have a whole aisles of chocolate.

But what I was starting to say about the bad chocolate …Well, two different things. To go off to your point on the consumer, one of the other problems is that there's so many people producing inferior chocolate that it's actually skewing the judging on the competitions.

SS: Oh. Wow. Okay.

AP: Because people are starting to think, "Well, this is what it's supposed to taste like." [SS: Uh huh. Yeah.]

You know, real rough around the edges and your Madagascar makes your eyes water. [SS: My gosh, yeah.] And then we suffer for that because, you know, we're a little bit more refined. Right?

And then I was going to say about getting bad quality beans: People need a business model to be able to dispose of bad quality beans. So like, it's hard, you know if the big guys get some beans that aren't up to par, they can just turn them into chocolate chips.

SS: Ahh. Okay.

AP: Right? [SS: Mhmm.] But some of these small guys, they get bad quality beans and, you know, a container of them, say. Right? [SS: Yeah.] All of a sudden, they're out of business. [SS: Mhmm. Mhmm.] And just because some farmer gave you a handshake and you sent him some money, does it mean he's going to ship you what he promised you? [SS: Yeah.] Cause I've had that happen before. Cost me $100,000.

SS: Oh my gosh.

AP: Well and there's a whole chain where it's like they may have sent you great beans and then they molded. You know? [SS: Right.] Something happened along the way that they couldn't control and you couldn't control. [SS: Yeah. Right.] Yeah, so many variables there.

And I don't think a lot of the farmers actually understand what good quality beans are. [SS: Mhmm, mhmm.] Because they're so far removed from the manufacturing process. [SS: Yeah, yeah.] And so you may taste some really great beans from them and then they may send you some more beans of theirs that aren't good, thinking that they are. [SS: Right. Right.] And there's no way to return them.

SS: Uh gosh. So then tell me this: How would you define, I mean … When I asked you about CCMA before,

you said [AP: Yeah.], "We didn't define craft chocolate. We set membership requirements and that was kind of around scale and ownership and the parameters that were, in many ways, reflective of what we see in craft beer with the Brewers Association …"

AP: When we started the CCMA, I think we started up with a lot of the right ideals and a lot of the right directions. But I think in hindsight, we might have done things a little bit differently. I think one of the problems we suffered, too, is that we had a vision, which I think was a great vision, but the industry grew so fast that it became really difficult to pass that same vision on.

Because all of us really early guys, we always spent, you know, literally we spent years researching it, when there was nobody other than Scharffen Berger and Steve DeVries. [SS: Yeah.] And, you know, we didn't really pay that much attention to … Chocolate Alchemy was out there and nobody really paid attention to them because we just we did our own research and our own thing. Just, you know, people that made chocolate in their garage back then. Nobody was actually, like, selling it. At that stage.

SS: Tell me this. You mentioned Steve and John Scharffenberger … Who was first? Who kind of set this, I don't know, craft movement in motion?

AP: Definitely I'd say definitely Scharffenberger. I mean, it was kind of Scharffen Berger that kind of got us started, as far as pushed us over the edge.

AP: I mean, I'd come up with the idea of making my own chocolate in '96, and I started experimenting shortly thereafter. So I was, like, totally off on my own at that stage, and I didn't even know about Scharffen Berger at that point. And Scharffen Berger became more popular, and …

And this is kind of a cool story actually: Scharffen Berger became more popular; I signed up as a retailer with them because I was, you know, I'm self-employed. So I'll just sell it to myself. [SS: Oh right on. (laughs)] Right. And then we got a programming contract with a company called Sageware, which is out of Oakland or was out of Oakland.

And I spent a year coding. From 9 in the morning to 9 at night. Do you remember a company called Verity? [SS: No.]

It's a big search company. It ended up being worth lots and lots of money—hundreds and millions of dollars sort of thing. They were our competitor. And we were writing code to compete with Verity, which, of course, is very scary because you know they've got, you know, hundreds of millions of dollars behind them. And so then … What ends up happening is that we promised Sageware that we could write this stuff and it would be faster than Verity.

So they gave us 150,000 bucks to do it. And, of course, we didn't know, but we knew if it was going to be fast, this is how it had to be done. So that's what we did.

We finally get it all done and we fly, we drive over to Oakland. We present it to them and, sure enough, we totally beat the pants off of Verity. We were stoked. And so afterwards, we were like, "Well, hey let's go do a tour through Scharffen Berger."

So we went and did the tour. And at the end it's, like, ends in the gift shop, you know, as a good tour is supposed to. They're clever about these things. And I said, "Hey, can I use my retailer discount?" They're like, "Yeah, sure." And so I get all this chocolate. I get up to the thing to pay for it. And then they're like, "Oh, well, we can't find you in the database." So they call the manager over and he's like, "Oh yeah, we took you off last week because you hadn't bought anything."

SS: Oh my gosh.

AP: And I'm, like, well yeah I've been busy. You know? And we're like, "Can you put back on?" And he's like,

“No.” [SS: What!] (both laugh) Yeah. So instead, I just bought a little bit of stuff instead of a lot of stuff, you know. We left the store completely, totally disgruntled. Not angry, but just, you know, not happy. And then we're like, “Screw it. We’re gonna make our own.”

SS: Oh my gosh. (laughs) Wow. That's how it started?

AP: Yeah.

SS: (laughs) That’s incredible.

AP: I've been making chocolate before, you know, and I had been designing, building my own machines to make chocolate. But it was always something I just did as a hobby. And so Clark and I are both have physics backgrounds, and so we have the 13-hour drive on the way back to Salt Lake on how to, you know, trying to figure out what machines we have to buy and which ones when we have to build and you know …

SS: Wow. That is absolutely insane.

AP: Yeah, if that manager had just given me the stinking discount …

SS: (laughs) And here you are, you guys just, like, your pockets have just been stuffed full of money in Oakland, and you're just like, “Nah, we’re just going to buy a few bars.” That's how that went?

AP: Yeah, pretty much.

SS: (laughs) That’s great. OK, so couple more questions. These new terms that are popping up—now it's bean-to-bar, it’s small batch, it’s specialty, it's craft and, again, it leads to … I mean, I suppose if there were established definitions, these things would make sense, but because there aren't any, to me, it certainly leads to industry confusion and consumer goods confusion.

AP: Yeah. When I was at a trade show … I went over to Expo West one year. And what I ended up seeing—and I'm not saying this to criticize any organization exactly, but more to address the consumer confusion here. [SS: Yeah.] What I ended up seeing, and kind of this whole health food arena is all about one upmanship. And so everyone is coming out with products that are almost identical to everybody else's, but they’ve got to find a way to differentiate it. So, you know, oh, it's, like, gluten free, or oh, it's organic … It’s the same product as what the other people have. [SS: Right. Right.] You know, can I get, like, one more certification that the other guy doesn't have. And it doesn't necessarily result in the better product.

In fact, it can actually end up with worse products. But ends up with the situation where all the consumer is buying is the labels and then the catchwords, rather than something that’s truly like what they’re maybe really looking for. And I don't know really what the solution to that is. But that's kind of what I see is that everybody is, you know, one upmanship and, like, you see that in the chocolate world with, like, the two-ingredient chocolate.

Well, we’re more pure because we only have two ingredients in our chocolate, and the other people have, you know, three, four or five ingredients in their chocolate. But it's like saying, “I'm going to make a cake. I'm just going to use flour and water because that's more pure.”

SS: Yeah, it's interesting. I think it was—I'm paraphrasing here slightly—Aubrey Lindley who says in show two, he's like, “It’s, sort of, a dubious badge of honor, this whole two ingredient thing.” Like, he's kind of casting a shade of skepticism on it. [AP: Yeah.] Yeah. So then what do you think?

What do you suggest consumers do in the wake of what is clearly an undefined, poorly differentiated space? What do you suggest we do—we, the chocolate eaters?

AP: Well, I mean, on some levels, I think it's really exciting because there's a lot of excitement, a lot of really exciting things that are happening, a lot of exploration. And, I think from the consumer's perspective, they should just join everybody on that journey.

Quite honestly. And some will be good, and some of it's not going to be so hot. [SS: OK.]

I think that's, you know, in relation to you making sure that our farmers are paid well. You know, let flavor be their guide. Also, you can't make good chocolate without good beans; you can't get good beans without paying farmers well.

So there are some people—and I like to think we're one of them—that produce, you know, really excellent chocolate. And it's up to the consumer to hunt those people out, just like any other product. But just because one person charges too much money, this shouldn't stop them from trying other people. And, you know, maybe they try four, five, six, eight, 10 brands before they find something that speaks to them.

SS: So there needs to be that capacity or a willingness to explore and kind of embrace that same kind of spirit that craft makers have done, which is, like, one of exploration and curiosity and a willingness to fail, you know, in some ways and try again.

AP: Right. Exactly.

And that's how society and the world moves along is through experimentation and some failure and mistakes. We all get up, regroup, dust ourselves off and try again.

SS: There we go.

AP: Food's one of those really great things because not everybody can, as I say, afford the world's best car, but they can afford the world's best chocolate. It's so, you know, if somebody spends money on some expensive chocolate bar that somebody doesn't like, then they're not really out that much, really.

They've got to try something new and unique and different, and then circle back around and try something else. And then, eventually, they'll find something that they really, truly like. Hopefully, then they stick with that.

SS: Exactly. Or they keep going because even there, I think, is that willingness. Once you embrace any sort of specialty product, I think you, as a consumer, have to accept the fact that it is a seasonal crop with diversity and let loose of that expectation that the next time I try even, you know, one of your bars is going to be the same as it was last year. I think it's just a reprogramming, kind of, for all of us across the board, if we want these diverse foods and these more interesting—

AP: Yeah. Well. I think that's one of the things that consumers need to really understand is that really good quality food, no matter what it is, has variation to it.

You know, you go into the grocery store and you could—well, I mean, even in the grocery store, you've got some carrots that are hard and woody, and others are really sweet and crisp. You can't expect that everything's always going to be the same. If it is, I mean then, it can be uniform but then it's just going to be uniformly bad.

SS: (laughs) That is great. You're right. It's funny how we expect this now of food. When it's like literally nothing in your day will be the exact same way it was yesterday—not the weather, not you moving through space. Nothing will be the same. But then there's this weird desire to have our foods be what we thought they would be. So, it's really interesting.

AP: Right. Yeah. Which, you know, totally removes the weather and the farmer and everything entirely out of the equation.

SS: Yeah. Exactly. Thank you. That is a perfect note to end on.