

Some of L.A.'s Best Chocolate Comes From a Living Room in Beverlywood

BY HEATHER PLATT

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Heather Platt

“We want to bring this back to being where we live,” says David Menkes, referring to what used to be his dining room and is now home to four chocolate grinders on a plastic folding table. Here in their second-story apartment on a quiet residential street in Beverlywood, Menkes and his wife sort, roast, proof, crack, winnow, grind, egg, temper, mold and wrap chocolate. The couple founded

grind, age, temper, mold and wrap chocolate. The couple founded their bean-to-chocolate company, Letterpress Chocolate, in 2014 – and despite the recent arrival in L.A. of Brooklyn's Mast Brothers, they contend that they are the only small-batch chocolate makers in the city.

“When we first heard [Mast Brothers] were moving in, I looked at it as a good thing,” Menkes says. “Now more people will see what this is, and we won’t be the only \$10 chocolate bar in town.”

“It’s an interesting dynamic that we have a much larger bean-to-bar maker coming in, because now a lot more people will see the process, which is cool.”

Despite his optimism, Menkes points out how vastly different Letterpress is from Mast: “They’re not artisanal. They bought \$500,000 in cacao last year. We bought \$5,000. They’re a \$10 million company.” His crowded, cacao-scented apartment is lined with a small library of books with chocolate-related titles and scattered with tools, gadgets and a large fridge filled with finished bars. It should be obvious to anyone familiar with larger chocolate makers that Letterpress is an altogether different operation.

“My wife and I are the entire company,” Menkes says. “We make about 50 to 100 bars a day. I just folded up about 55 bars this morning.”





David Menkes tends to his chocolate in what used to be his dining room.

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Menkes, a former computer graphics artist at Sony, left his day job two years ago to pursue a career in chocolate. "I want to do something that I'm going to enjoy and that I can dedicate the rest of my life to," he says. Menkes' enthusiasm is as much about making a delicious bar as it is about making an ethically responsible one.

The intricate process taking place in the couple's apartment doesn't begin until after they've hunted down what they consider to be the best cacao beans on Earth. They're able to find many of them through collaborations with other small bean-to-bar chocolate makers.

Perhaps the most fascinating of the sources is Liberation Cocoa. The program, headed by San Francisco's Dandelion Chocolate, supports the rehabilitation of child soldiers in Liberia by reintegrating them into sustainable chocolate farming jobs. "So, here it is," Menkes says, pointing to the table-top grinder that's swirling chocolate. A piece of tape is stuck to the table beside it scribbled with the word "Liberia."

Menkes says he and his wife work directly with the farms they source from to ensure the workers are being fairly paid. "There's a whole bunch of crazy stuff going on in West Africa, where they literally kidnap kids and then they enslave them and make them work their whole lives for free," he says. "We like to visit the farms or we work with other chocolate makers. We've never made chocolate from beans where we haven't at least known someone who's gone down there and said it's on the up and up."





Letterpress Chocolate

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In addition to discovering various sources, the couple has invested in their own farms. In Belize, Letterpress has planted 4,000 trees as part of the co-op Maya Mountain Cacao. In Guatemala, their farm is part of a sustainable agro-forest called Izabal Agro Forest. "All around our farm is just monoculture. It's cattle pasture. All of the rainforest has been completely clear-cut. It's all gone." The profits of Izabal Agro Forest are going toward buying back the surrounding land to be reintegrated to its natural state.

Once the beans make their way to Los Angeles, Menkes and his wife sort through them one by one – a process that for the large industrial chocolate companies involves only destoner machines, for getting rid of rocks that could break the machinery. "All of the other crazy stuff that's in there that we get rid of, they don't get rid of that," Menkes claims. "We've had to sort out a decent amount of stuff." Menkes describes finding sticks, rocks, newspaper, bullet casings and worms when sorting through beans from Liberia.

After sorting, they roast the beans in their own oven, which hasn't seen anything but cacao beans in two years (since the smell of cooking food would permeate the chocolate production). The couple cracks the beans by hand, separating the nibs from the husks in a winnower machine that was custom-made by a close friend. The nibs are ground on their table top for days and then aged, tempered, poured into molds and wrapped, imperfectly, in their "wrapping room" (a converted bedroom).

How does this kind of hands-on care affect the quality of the product? There's already a waiting list for their bars. In addition to a small handful of boutiques around L.A. that sell Letterpress, Menkes drops off a case of chocolate to a buddy's office at DreamWorks,

where he sells bars to co-workers from his desk. Letterpress also is one of the featured vendors at the Unique L.A. Market on April 30 and May 1.

Despite its popularity among people in the know, Letterpress has yet to turn a profit. Menkes and his wife have invested every cent they've made back into equipment, cacao farms, beans and materials. It might not be long, however, before they turn over a new leaf. "We're hoping that this year," Menkes says, "we can afford a little production space."



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