



In Love with Chocolate and Medicine

INTEREST IN CHOCOLATE

Chocolate is a really fascinating food. It has a basic flavour that appeals to taste buds across cultures, yet the versatility to be appreciated in countless ways, especially when paired with ingredients from around the world. It contains theobromine, a gentle stimulant that can lift our spirits; and cocoa butter – the hallmark of good chocolate – that makes it melt smoothly at oral temperature to titillate our senses.

All these were experienced first-hand during my early days of work, when ward staff often get chocolates as gift. As a houseman, I witnessed how a sick child in the paediatric oncology ward found comfort in chocolate. When I was a medical officer, a cardiothoracic surgeon rewarded my colleagues and me with a huge box of Godiva truffles in the midst of our tough posting. It was a memorable treat that got me seriously hooked on chocolates. Since medical officers were not that well paid in those days, I figured it makes economic sense to learn how to make my own chocolates. It was of course much more challenging than expected, but it also marked the start of a long journey which took me from making chocolates at home, to starting Chocoelf chocolate shop, to owning a chocolate factory now.

KEY TO MAKING GOOD CHOCOLATE

The role of a chocolatier is to turn big blocks of uninviting raw chocolates into beautiful pralines and truffles.

The basic steps of chocolate-making include melting the chocolate, adding the fillings and then cooling it. But I find that the key to good chocolate, really, is *tempering* the chocolate. When melted chocolates are cooled, crystals start to appear. These crystals give chocolate its solid form. However, not all crystals are good; some may be too coarse and can adversely affect the texture and mouthfeel of the chocolate. So the chocolate temperature has to be raised again to melt these crystals, leaving only the good ones behind.

This process is called tempering and different chocolates have different “tempers”. Dark chocolate is different from milk chocolate, which is different from white chocolate. A batch of single origin chocolate from Ecuador can

be quite different from Ivory Coast and Madagascar ones. It is only after mastering the chocolate’s temper that one can go on to make good chocolates.

THE ART OF MEDICINE AND CHOCOLATE

After spending more than a decade making chocolates, I have come to see many parallels between medicine and chocolate, which make them both truly enjoyable trades. Like medicine, making chocolate is an art, because much depends on judgement. Just like no two patients are the same, the subtle differences in ingredients can lead to different flavour profiles and outcomes.

Like medicine, chocolate-making is an apprenticeship. For me, reading lots of books and getting tons of online information about chocolate-making was easy, but combining theory and practical skills to make quality chocolates was difficult.

I was fortunate to find an experienced chocolatier to be my teacher and now my co-founder of Chocoelf.

I often get asked how I manage to find time for both medicine and chocolates. Looking back, it must have been the passion. With passion, somehow time will avail and with



it, the drive to keep going. Many weekends were spent experimenting with different recipes to create every chocolate we have now.

MEMORABLE MOMENTS

Starting a business is not easy and I remember the earlier days when I had to rush to the factory after evening rounds to make chocolates late into the night, in order to fulfil the next days' orders. It was tough, but the endurance developed through medical training certainly came in handy. Now, with a team of more than ten people, I get to spend more time focusing on designing and creating new product ideas for the market, which is really fun. One of our products – the Lion Series – which tells the history of Singapore using chocolate flavours, won the Great Singapore Food Gift Award and is a popular gift Singaporeans give to their overseas friends.

REWARDING MOMENTS

Making chocolate is therapeutic. Whenever there is a chance, I still like to lock myself in my factory's chocolate room for hours, so I can find a private space to both concentrate and relax. And these are the unique moments when new chocolate inspirations strike.

Winning the Singapore Prestige Brand Award in 2014 was a proud moment for Chocoelf. I am very thankful to



see Chocoelf chocolates brightening up people's lives every day. Our chocolates have been used many times in marriage proposals, as gifts to heal relationships and as a medium for people to express their thanks and appreciation for each other. In recent years, Chocoelf has also been part of the memories tourists bring home from Singapore, when they buy souvenir chocolates at iconic destinations like Gardens by the Bay and Marina Bay Sands.

FUTURE PLANS

When I first started out, all I wanted to do was to make good chocolates for people around me. Now I hope to build Chocoelf into an international chocolate brand and to showcase our Singapore-style chocolates to the rest of the world. Is that too bold a dream? Who knows?

Just enjoy the ride. ♦



PROFILE



TEXT AND PHOTOS BY

DR JOE LEE

Dr Joe Lee is a consultant urologist at the National University Hospital with special interests in andrology, male reproductive medicine and reconstructive urology. He is an after-office-hours chocolate entrepreneur and founder of Chocoelf, an award-winning Singapore chocolate brand. Chocoelf may be found at Takashimaya B2.

Legend

- 1. An exclusive range of chocolates at the Marina Bay Sands
- 2. Dr Joe Lee (second from the left) receiving the Singapore Prestige Brand Award for Chocoelf
- 3. The Lion Series chocolates, winner of the Great Singapore Food Gift Award