

They're Making Bean-To-Bar Dark Chocolate

Captain's Chocolate, of Neosho, Wis., produces and sells single-origin, bean-to-bar vegan dark chocolate from Costa Rica. The company name gives a hint to its origins.

"My oldest brother Mark was a salmon fisherman in Alaska," says Sarah Uhing, company owner. "He started spending his winters in Costa Rica to escape the cold and eventually bought remote land near indigenous tribal lands. He's not someone to sit on a beach, so he got to know his neighbors."

Over time, Mark learned about the region's struggles with chocolate production. Not only had local tribes lost a large portion of their cacao orchards to a tree fungus, but the local chocolate buyer was only paying 60% of the global commodity price.

"It was insulting, frankly," Uhing says. "The region produces some of the highest quality chocolate in the world, but the farmers were making almost nothing from it."

Eight years ago, Mark purchased 10,000 disease-resistant seedlings and worked with two tribes to plant and cultivate them. Today, all Captain's Chocolate cacao comes from them.

"We handle every part of the process ourselves," Uhing says. "Initially, we intended to make the chocolate right in Costa Rica, but that proved impossible because of how fast chocolate can melt.

Shipping would be a disaster."

Instead, the Costa Rican facility handles fermenting, roasting and drying, then ships the chocolate nibs (crushed cacao beans) to Wisconsin, where molding, grinding and tempering take place.

"We make chocolate every single week in our licensed food processing kitchen," Uhing says.

The international nature of the business creates challenges. She shares that they try to ship a year's supply of cacao nibs at a time to keep costs as low as possible.

"Our shipping costs have gone from \$7,000 to over \$10,000 in the past few months. It's been a headache."

"We've always tried to pay our farmers fair wages. Now, with tariffs and the scarcity of cacao trees, the global commodity price has tripled. And I don't see that ending any time soon—replacement trees can only grow so fast."

Captain's Chocolate seeks to combat this problem by bulking up their orchards with an additional 10,000 trees.

Still, the positives make the business worth it.

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All Captain's Chocolate is vegan and gluten-free.



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"I have nothing against milk," Uhing clarifies. "Milk chocolate is delicious, but it requires powdered milk. It's an entirely different product, a different manufacturing process. Sourcing organic options at our scale would be extremely cost-prohibitive, maybe even impossible."

Instead, the chocolate contains just two ingredients, organic cacao beans and cane sugar. There are no stabilizing agents, Uhing shares that they're only added by competitors to cut costs.

"We take our time in the manufacturing process, which eliminates much of the bitterness people associate with dark chocolate. I hear it all the time from customers, 'I never liked dark chocolate until I tasted yours!'"

Captain's Chocolate is working to launch a new product, cacao brew.

The brew will be sold dry for home brewing, with tentative plans to bottle and distribute it premade at local convenience stores.

The business also hopes to connect with farm-to-table restaurants.

"We feel those are our people," Uhing says. "They understand the importance of knowing where your food comes from. And there's hardly any good options for chocolate like we're offering it."

The chocolate is sold online, at the retail store in Neosho, and throughout various retailers in Wisconsin and Alaska.

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"We often opt to use sap to make a beer with a darker grain bill, like a porter or a stout, because the flavors of the sap blend well and those styles can handle a few extra gravity points," says Josephson.



Brewery Uses Tree Sap In Beer

Many breweries are experimenting with an innovative ingredient to make their beers stand out—tree sap. It's a strategy that's served Scratch Brewing Company of Ava, Ill., well. The microbrewery uses ingredients foraged from forests and fields, including sap from river birch and walnut trees.

"There's not so much for us to harvest in the woods in the winter, so it's always exciting to find something nature can give us

when it's off the traditional growing season," says Marika Josephson, Scratch Brewing co-owner. "Tree sap is so thin before it's cooked down to syrup; it just made sense to use it in place of water."

Tree sap is 2% sugar by volume, making it only slightly denser than water. Still, it can boost the strength of beer by 1% ABV.

"We harvest the sap a day or two before we brew and keep it cold in our walk-in,"

Josephson says. "On brew day, we're heating the sap to about 162 degrees, the temperature you want to mash in grain. If there's enough sap, we'll sparge with it so that the whole beer is made with sap. From that point on, it's brewed exactly like any other beer in our kettle with hops and/or other flavoring ingredients."

The contributions of tree sap are subtle. Josephson clarifies that any flavor notes are easily overwhelmed by other flavors in the beer.

"People think the beers will taste like syrup, but the flavor is different. Even with syrup instead of sap, all the sugar ferments out, so there's a unique mineral flavor instead."

Sap contains a variety of minerals, primarily calcium and potassium, along with trace amounts of copper, phosphorus, magnesium, zinc and manganese.

"It tastes the way people often describe wines that have a mineral flavor, which makes sense because it's what the trees are pulling up from the ground."

"You can taste some of the other components that make those trees special. Especially with trees beside maple. Walnut sap tastes a lot like green walnuts when we've

used it in beer," Josephson says.

While home brewers might find tree sap intimidating, Josephson believes it's well worth the experimentation.

"Sap is easy to swap in because all you have to do is replace a portion of the water. Just remember that it'll also add some extra sugar and mineral components. We often opt to use sap to make a beer with a darker grain bill, like a porter or a stout, because the flavors of the sap blend well and those styles can handle a few extra gravity points."

She recommends adding plenty of nutritional yeast to sap-brewed beers. This ensures the yeast is fully healthy and oxygenating more than it usually would. Likewise, it's best not to tap the same tree for more than three years. Avoid any sap that has an odor or has turned brown, and aim to start the brewing process within 24 hrs. of harvesting to prevent fermentation.

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They're Adding Kernza To Packaged Mixes

Missi Blue is concerned about the food she feeds her family and customers, which is one reason she added the perennial grain Kernza to the packaged mixes she offers. The co-owner of Sturdiwheat celebrates the company's unique heritage and its connection to local farmers. She notes that adding locally grown Kernza to her ingredients is a good fit. It supports a local grower, benefits the soil, and gives her customers another great taste. Best of all, the Kernza mixes are just as family-friendly as other Sturdiwheat products.

"Most of our mixes are complete with the addition of a cup of water, while others also use a cup of butter," says Blue. "That's the way Arnold Kaehler did it when he started the company in 1939, and that's the way we do it today."

Creating the company and the mixes were the result of an equipment breakdown. Kaehler had a portable mill he took to farms to mill their grain. Normally, it sifted out all the outer layers of the wheat. When the mill's screens broke, some outer layers

sifted through by mistake.

Kaehler was curious and tasted the resulting flour. He liked the flavor enough to take it home and experiment with it. Before long, he had turned the partially whole grain flour into a cereal and a pancake mix. Proud of the strength-building character of his mixes, he called the company Sturdiwheat and based it in Red Wing, Minn.

Still based in Red Wing, Sturdiwheat remains a family-owned business. How much of each layer of the kernel that's used remains a company secret, notes Blue. It's also what keeps longtime customers coming back for more. They also appreciate that the mixes are all natural, contain no preservatives, and are GMO-free.

Over the years, more products were added to the list. Today, Blue and her mother offer 15 different pancake mixes, including the original, as well as the original hot cereal. In addition, they offer a wide array of other mixes for everything from quick breads and yeast bread to desserts and coatings.

Kernza flour can be found in dessert,

pancake and quick bread mixes.

"We've been working with Kernza for a couple of years," says Blue. "Our customers like the nutty flavor, and we appreciate what planting it does for the environment. We also like that we can buy it from a local farmer."

While Kaehler started the company by selling his mixes in the area, Sturdiwheat is now found in grocery stores throughout the region.

The Sturdiwheat website has a complete list of products and prices, along with free shipping on orders over \$75. Blue has also posted her blog, videos and recipes for ways to use the different mixes.

In a show of support for Kernza, Sturdiwheat was the first food company to join Perennial Percent™. The program was introduced by The Land Institute, developer of Kernza and other perennial grains. Members agree to use at least 1% Kernza in every product.

"We're excited to support the Perennial Percent label and see it gain traction in the market," says Blue. "We live and work along the Mississippi River and care deeply about



Sturdiwheat bills itself as family-friendly, with mixes easy enough for kids to make.

the river's water quality. Using deep-rooted, perennial Kernza grain not only makes delicious products, but also builds a market for regenerative ingredients, giving farmers an economic incentive to plant more acres of perennial crops."

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