

Chuck Siegel

The chocolatier



Culinate.com By Emily Stone

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America's billion-dollar market for premium chocolate has traditionally belonged to corporate candy makers, such as Godiva and Lindt. But in recent years independent companies, from John & Kira's in Philadelphia to Lillie Belle Farms in southern Oregon, have begun offering conscientious consumers bon bons made with local, organic, and sustainable ingredients.

Chuck Siegel is a 20-year veteran of the Bay Area chocolate scene and the founder of Charles Chocolates. He rejects the industrial supply chain and handpicks his own chocolate ingredients.

Over the past 10 years, San Francisco has become a chocolate mecca, with the founding of Scharffen Berger, increased production at the historic Guittard factory, and the opening of boutique chocolate companies like yours. What's your take on all this?

Both Scharffen Berger and Guittard represent a large part of why the Bay Area is such an important chocolate area; Scharffen Berger, because they really understand how to market their product to a wider audience, and Guittard, because they have a huge impact on the chocolatier and pastry-chef markets nationwide. As far as chocolatiers are concerned, we live in one of the most vibrant and innovative food communities in the country. It's almost inevitable that we're influential.

What ingredients do you use in the hot chocolate and the pastries sold at your café? In the hot chocolate, we'll be using Straus cream. For the pastries, when we're using dairy it will be Straus. The flours will be from a mill in the Bay Area called Giusto's. It's a local vendor and it's organic, which are two things we look for.



Chocolates fresh off the line at Charles Chocolates.

How did you choose Straus as your dairy source?

In candy making, we have to cook cream, and usually that degrades the flavor and the texture of the cream. The thing that we're most used to seeing is a bitter aftertaste. The Straus cream, even when we bring it to a boil, stays really, really sweet. Outside of European cream, it's the only cream I've found where that's the case. The flavor is just fantastic.

Why are organic foods so important to you?

I've always felt very strongly that we should eat food that is, if you will, found in nature. I don't believe in overprocessed foods. I don't believe in foods that contain additives, preservatives, or chemicals. Those things basically have no reason to be in the food in the first place, other than to give it a 12-month shelf life.

How do you feel about using preservatives and additives in chocolate, then?

If you look at our chocolate truffles, they have a four-week shelf-life. Now, that's primarily because dairy products go bad really fast. The fact that we cook the cream first lets it last that long, combined with a "vacuum-mixing" process that allows us to make ganache without incorporating air into it. But, at the end of the day, there's nothing in there to retard the growth of all the stuff that makes dairy go bad.

I won't name names, but when you see a truffle that's on the shelf at Macy's, you know if there's cream, there are also preservatives and additives. I mean, if you think about the distribution chain to get a product from any manufacturer onto the shelves of one of their 400 stores, and then have it sit there for however long it has to before it sells ...

We certainly have vendors trying to sell us stuff that has additives. We have the additive companies themselves calling us, assuming that we use those ingredients. They're trying to sell me preservatives that will allow our products to go through that kind of classic distribution chain. But we don't want to go through that distribution chain, so it's moot.

Do you think consumers are becoming more savvy about their chocolates, seeking out the product with the shorter shelf life?

Oh, absolutely. Our customers don't want us to sell a truffle that lasts for four months. With a four-week shelf life, we can ship to consumers anywhere. But part of our model is everything gets shipped within three days of being made, because we know that when someone gets a one-pound box of chocolate, they're not going to eat it all in a day or two. We want the customers to get the full benefit of that shelf life. They're buying our product — they're paying a premium for it, quite frankly — because they know it's all natural and it's naturally perishable.

What about organic chocolate? Do you use it?

Well, it's definitely something that I'm very, very interested in. We get samples from all of the organic chocolate companies. With one exception, I have yet to find an organic chocolate that's really good and that I could use for my confections in good conscience.

Most organic chocolates, certainly from the taste perspective, leave me kind of wanting. The beans don't have the character of some of the conventional beans from really, really old cacao plantations.

But I have recently become very interested in a new company up in Seattle called Theo Chocolate. It's a small chocolate maker, kind of akin to what Scharffen Berger has built in Berkeley, and it's all organic. We're actually in talks with them right now to start using it for some of our products.

What are the rest of the organic chocolate companies doing wrong?

It's not the chocolate companies, necessarily. A lot of it is the maturity of the cacao. A lot of what's been planted organic is just really immature. It's kind of like wine grapes. When you plant a new vineyard, the first grapes that are produced by the vineyard just aren't that good. But after about 10 years, the vines start producing phenomenal grapes. And cacao is very similar. So as time goes by, all of this organic root stock that's been planted will start producing phenomenal beans. It's just a matter of time.

When do you expect the bulk of other organic companies to hit that 10-year mark?

Oh, I'd say within the next five years. It's coming pretty quickly.

New York-based Emily Stone keeps a blog called [Chocolate in Context](#).