

QUARTERLY REVIEW OF WINES

Quarterly Review of Wines  
Spring 2008

# QRW

*The Wine Magazine*

*California,  
Best of The Best*

**Provence's Top Tables**

**Buffo Barbaresco and Barolo**

**Quintessential  
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**Dark Chocolate to Die For**

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# Sweet Dreams

*How a Tuscan brother and sister and an American tyro became chocolate moguls.*

ELISABETH TOWNSEND

This is a tale about two chocolatiers. One comes from a candy-making family in Tuscany; the other is a hot air balloonist who hails from Georgia. They both have entrepreneurial spirits and a passion for chocolate, but there the similarity ends.

In separate telephone interviews, these two men talked about their love affair with fine chocolate and their fearless pursuit to produce the world's best. Both use the most flavorful and rare beans for the treasures they offer up to their consumers and pastry chefs. They thrive in a secretive world where there is intense competition to find new cocoa bean sources and invent new taste sensations. What they don't say is almost as telling as what they reveal. Although their quest was the same, they took very different paths to reach the top.

## ALESSIO AND CECILIA TESSIERI — ARTISANAL CHOCOLATIERS AND COCOA GROWERS

Alessio Tessieri, co-founder of the award-winning Italian chocolate company Amedei Srl, was venturing into dangerous territory. Not because the Venezuelan plantations, site of the prized Chuao cocoa bean, are an arduous two-day trip from Italy via air, water and dirt roads. But because he knew that Valrhona, the French chocolate-making Goliath, bought all of the Croillo beans, considered the best cocoa in the world, produced on the Chuao plantation. He had been dreaming about Chuao for many years and finally decided to go there in 1999.

In 1990 Alessio and his sister, Cecilia Tessieri, founded Amedei. Their Tuscan factory is in the village of La Rotta, part of the town of Pontedera. They have included their chocolate-

loving grandmother by naming the company after her, and their parents, who once owned a baking supply business.

When the Tessieris were first starting out, they tried to buy chocolate from Valrhona. According to the now-legendary story, they were told by Valrhona that Italians weren't skilled enough to use their chocolate. That's when the Tessieris turned the insult into action. Rather than use another company's ready-to-melt chocolate, as most chocolatiers do, they decided to buy beans directly from the growers and make their own chocolate.

After a year of negotiations with the farmer's cooperative, they struck a deal in 2000. The growers, on this small peninsula accessible only by boat, agreed to sell all their beans exclusively to Amedei, establishing a long-term relationship directly with the family artisanal chocolate maker. Tessieri would invest in the community—schools, training, and local transportation—and pay the growers more for their aromatic beans, setting a new standard for fair trade. Take that, Valrhona!

It has paid off in gold. The "Chuao" bar, 70% cocoa, has won gold medals in the first two world chocolate competitions. They seem to have a flawless conversion of the cocoa seed into exceptional chocolate—shepherding the beans through the steps of fermenting, drying, roasting, shelling, grinding, conching [stirring and kneading], and tempering.

"We love to be perfectionists," said Tessieri, 44. "We cannot produce the best... if we don't control all [of] the [supply] chain."

Meanwhile Cecilia, 40, transforms the magic beans into exquisite chocolate morsels. That has been the biggest surprise for Tessieri—to discover that his sister, perhaps Europe's only female master chocolate maker, or *mâitre chocolatier*, is so talented in creating chocolate recipes.

*. . . a tale [of] two chocolatiers . . . [with] a passion for chocolate . . .  
[who] talk . . . about their love affair with fine chocolate and their fearless pursuit  
to produce the world's best . . . [using] the most flavorful and rare beans for the  
treasures they offer up to their consumers and pastry chefs.*

Cecilia, who honed her skills intensively in France, Italy, and Switzerland, coaxed the rebellious Chuao into a coveted, single-origin chocolate bar from what was once only a blending ingredient that chocolatiers used to improve the taste of other chocolate. Chuao, like wine, reflects its terroir. "It is a fantastic microclimate," said Tessieri, about the plantation, with the same name as the village, that is surrounded by mountains with several rivers irrigating and fertilizing the plantation. "You have a . . . natural miracle," he said, because the wild cross-pollination of the different variety of trees has created a premium blend just from this plantation.

This may be the most expensive chocolate in the world [\$12, 1.75 oz.] and it looks the part. "Chuao" tastes as good as it looks: first a coffee flavor, then a strong sensation of creaminess, next lightly fruity, and always very, very smooth with a clean aftertaste. That said, there is a *je ne sais quoi* flavor that is immensely satisfying.

The Tessieris are not satisfied yet. "I was and still . . . am sometime[s] a crazy dreamer," said Alessio Tessieri. Some years ago he asked his sister about her dreams. Cecilia said, "To produce the chocolate that I have never tasted."

**JOHN PARIS — CHOCOLATIER,  
ENTREPRENEUR, HOT-AIR BALLOONIST**

"When I was a kid . . . I was addicted to Turtles®," said John Paris, 60, founder of Paris Chocolates, Inc. Eating Turtles®, a combination of pecans, caramel, and milk chocolate, was a common experience in the South when he was growing up in the 1940s and 1950s. It still is. Paris had those Turtles® in mind when he decided to become a chocolatier.

Tessieri went to South America in his pursuit of the best chocolate, but Paris went to Switzerland. In fact, he moved there. Relocating to Switzerland was not an impulsive decision. "If anybody knows anything about milk chocolate . . . it's the Swiss," said Paris. A thorough researcher, he wanted to soak up as much chocolate knowledge as he could from the experts. Simultaneously, he was on the lookout for a reputable producer to invest in, who also could help with recipe development. Plus, the bonus was the right to use "Swiss," the registered trademark from the Union of Swiss Chocolate Manufacturers that guarantees quality.

Paris hadn't forgotten the Turtles® of his youth when he set out to create his own caramel recipe. While living on Lake Geneva, he spent countless hours in the kitchen refining the formula, even trying the recipes his mother, a cooking school teacher, sent him. "I picked a lot of people's brains," he said. "I spoke to candy makers and chefs as well as people who understood the molecular structure and caramelization process of the different kinds of sugar, and the cooking qualities of various types of butter, cream, milk, and vanilla." Nine months and countless batches later, he had replicated his ideal flavor.

The first candy Paris made was a bar that resembled the original Nestlé® Turtles® but was different. He created one with his own Swiss dark chocolate with a little milk, which was delivered to his U.S. finishing factory. He poured the chocolate over the more than half-inch thick strip of caramel, pecans, fresh butter, and heavy dairy cream.

But what to call his new company? "I decided it would be really nice to tie the most exciting human endeavor with the most popular and fun human food product," said Paris, who adores flying in his hot air balloon. He was determined to

give his company, started in 1987, an easily recognizable gold airplane icon that would stand out on store shelves. He called the caramel bars “Flyer®,” and the chocolate bars “Paris® Flyer®,” numbering them like his balloon aviation designation.

The gold airplane is on every package, including the irresistible, delicious handmade chewy caramel bars, perhaps one of the most expensive candy bars (about \$2.10 website; \$2.69 Whole Foods Market). Paris holds caramel-pulling contests and one winner managed to pull a 30-inch string. The Paris Very Dark Chocolate (about \$3 website), 77% cocoa, made from organic, fair-traded Costa Rican beans, is immensely pleasing, with a smoky, earthy flavor, and a creamy, coffee-flavored finish. Look forward to two new dark chocolate bars in the spring, but don’t ask where Paris found the cocoa.

“Where I... go is a secret!” wrote Paris in a follow-up email, though his company also uses internal and external scouts. “We are incessantly looking for and tasting beans by making small batches of chocolate... We have spies all over the world.”

Paris, describes himself as a “perfectionist of sorts,” too, and it shows in his candy. But he wasn’t always a candy maker. Shortly after graduating from Lehigh University, Paris, age 25, took a risk and founded his first company, Paris Properties, a profitable investment real estate business that purchased new and redeveloped older, historic and other types of commercial buildings.

Chocolate making gave him the chance to burrow into another subject while constructing “a fun product.” “Grinding, conch-

ing, and bean origins are very important, as is the aging of dark chocolate,” wrote Paris. He ages it a minimum of 90 days and his milk chocolate a minimum of 60 days. The lengthy 60- to 72-hour conching produces smoother, more fragrant chocolate, and is unusual in the chocolate industry.

Did he ever think this company wouldn’t succeed? Paris doesn’t think of himself as a risk taker because he carefully prepares for each new venture, much like his groundwork for ballooning. For example, he discovered during his research that “most of the chocolate in this country is sold in the form of a candy bar.” But Paris has another way of thinking about it.

“I never really assumed that I couldn’t do it, and I think that’s probably key to being an entrepreneur,” said Paris. “I don’t think I thought about the odds, which are really horrific.”

His biggest surprise is “looking back in amazement at the complexities, challenges, and nimbleness that were required to make good chocolate and create a brand, and the fact that I was crazy enough to follow this dream.”

Different dreams realized with divergent business models. Both concentrate on the best ingredients and finest

manufacturing methods. Yet one has married his desire for wondrous chocolate with social justice. The other has translated a childhood reminiscence into another profitable, yet playful company. In the end, superb chocolate for our pleasure. ☞

#### AMEDEI SRL

*www.amedei-us.com*

**Products:** Chocolate bars, pralines, truffles, and professional cooking chocolate. [Note: Other chocolates may be called Chuao; it is not from the original Chuao plantation.]

**Available:** Gourmet stores, pastries at fine restaurants, or website.

**Serve:** Room temperature.

**Store:** Store it much like wine, at 50–60 degrees Fahrenheit, ideally at 55% humidity.

**Shelf life:** Official shelf life of 14 months; can last many years if stored properly.

#### PARIS CHOCOLATES, INC.

800-226-3922; *www.flyerchocolate.com*

**Products:** Fifteen retail bars, including the organic Paris Very Dark Chocolate 77%, and professional cooking chocolate.

**Available:** In over 2,000 independent gourmet, specialty, and natural food stores, in four- and five-star hotels, or website.

**Serve:** Room temperature.

**Store:** In a cool, dry, dark place, away from other aromas or odors; not refrigerated. In summer, in normal air conditioning.

**Shelf life:** Between nine and 18 months.

# Dark Victory

QRW's annual chocolate tasting pinpoints six scrumptious specimens.

## QRW STAFF

January 20, which tradition says is the coldest night of the year, is a two-fold experience. It's the time virgins have visions of their lovers; and it's the time associated with sweets and other delicacies, of which lovers partake, as they do in Keats' "The Eve of St. Agnes," ensuring an evening of epic erotica. We can't help with the first part of this tradition, but we can with the second, and to that end we had the second Annual Blind Dark Chocolate Eve of St. Agnes tasting.

While the tasting offered few surprises, it offered some rich dark chocolate experiences, explaining why lovers of the cacao bean see it as *theobroma* (food of the gods). We collected 15 dark chocolate samples, cut them evenly into one inch squares, served them on small individually numbered saucers, and tasted. As with wine, a dark chocolate tasting requires concentration and memory. The panel dealt with aromas, tasted for flavors, and concentrated on texture and finish. We cleared our palates with sparkling water after each sample. (Sparkling water, we found, clears

the palate faster and cleaner.) Nearly all the dark chocolate in the market we tasted is very good, some spectacular, like Paris and Amedei. Dark chocolate has become the darling of the healthy and wealthy, and the snob appeal that has emerged around the product is not unlike that of fine wine and, frankly, not a little amusing. Nonetheless, dark chocolate is in another orbit compared to most milk chocolates we know as adults. It's an indulgence worth pursuing.

## THE TASTING

As we do at our wine tastings, we pre-taste. We tasted this time only those dark chocolate with 70% or more cacao content, which makes for richer and deeper dark chocolate. In this case, we pre-tasted 15 dark chocolate samples and narrowed that list to a final six. All the dark chocolates are available at most retail stores, like Whole Foods, Bloomingdale's, and Nieman Marcus. Admittedly, they are not always easy to find.

**The results.** We offer The Best of Show first, and the rest—all excellent—are alphabetically listed.



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### Best of Show

- **PARIS (VERY DARK CHOCOLATE, 77%).**

Delicious. Nutty, peppery, spicy. Deep and engaging cacao flavors, rich texture, with long and pleasing finish of coffee/mocha notes. Considerable depth. A chocolate of choice for many chocolatiers. Exceptional. Complex. Delicious. (\$3.00 per bar)



PARIS  
*Chocolates*

FOUNDED 1987  
USA - SWITZERLAND

- **AMEDEI CHUAO (BITTER CHOCOLATE EXTRA, 70%).** If you like a slightly bitter note to your dark chocolate this Amedei is excellent in the extreme. Rich red and black berry flavors. A spirited dark chocolate with Cognac/Armagnac expressions. Rich cacao flavors. Long, complex finish. Very fine. (\$12 for 1.75 oz.)
- **GREEN & BLACK'S (ORGANIC DARK CHOCOLATE, 70%).** Easily approachable, with snappiness to the bite. Good rich fruit and red berry flavors. Deep tastes with mocha flavors; intense and very satisfying finish. (\$4 for 3 oz.)
- **LAKE CHAMPLAIN (SMALL WORLD, SAO THOME, 70%).** Dark berry flavors. Buttery feel. Creamy. Rich upfront. Finish is generous and deeply lingering. Sumptuous chocolate. (\$4.50 for 3 oz.)
- **NŌKA (THE VINTAGE COLLECTION, 75%).** Tasters preferred the NōKA chocolate sample from Ecuador called Carmeno. Fragrant. Rich roasted tones, soft, slightly sweet, with generous dark berry flavors, coffee/mocha and cacao flavors. Delicious, pricey, and worth it. (\$16 for four-piece sample box of Estate Chocolates)
- **SCHARFFEN BERGER (BITTERSWEET, PURE DARK CHOCOLATE 70%).** Always a reliable and delicious, dark, roasted chocolate. Espresso coffee and cedar tones. Creamy. Concentrated, with good texture and mouth feel. Splendid. (\$4 for 3 oz.) ☒