



Chocolatiers to the Stars

Sea salt, cardamom, pepper, chilli, frankincense and peppercorn – they're all flavours offered by New Zealand chocolatiers, Schoc Choc, reports **Rachael Oakes-Ash**.

CHOC-O-LATE – THAT'S THREE

simple syllables that say so much to so many. This powerful cocoa bean has held pulling power since it was first discovered in the Amazon in 2000 BC, then utilised as a health elixir by the Maya culture in 300 AD and used as currency by the Aztecs in 1200 AD.

Its health (and aphrodisiac) qualities were first discovered by the same Aztecs, who mixed ground cocoa with hot chilli to promote fertility and vigour. But it was the 16th-century Spaniards who first used sugar to create the indulgent chocolate flavours we know and crave today, promising comfort, passion and power in the one bite.

The cocoa market has since boomed, with billions of dollars spent annually by chocoholics searching for a fix. The US market for chocolate suggests it will be worth \$18 billion domestically come 2011. China is the next massive market on the cocoa map, with experts predicting it to be the world's largest future chocolate consumer. And Barry Callebaut, the world's leading premium chocolate supplier, predicts Russia's chocolate consumption to rise 32 per cent over the next four years.

Two men in the gourmet New Zealand town of Greytown, near the nation's capital of Wellington, have long known the lure of chocolate. Murray Langham and Roger Simpson understand that chocolate is more than just a trading commodity. The founders of Chocolate Therapy and boutique chocolate label, Schoc Choc, know the healing qualities that this ancient bean supplies.

The journal of the American Heart Association, *Circulation*, has linked a reduction in blood pressure with flavonol-rich dark chocolate. They've even linked a reduction of cholesterol with the same, but Murray and Roger have gone one step further, believing you can heal your life through chocolate.

Both have trained in various forms of therapy, from hypnotherapy and spiritual therapy to Neuro Linguistic Programming. Whether you agree with New Age philosophies or not, something's working.

Langham's *Chocolate Therapy* book, first launched in 1998 by Hazard Press and illustrated by Simpson, is based on finding your personality through your choice of chocolate. It made the best-seller list in New Zealand and was published in England, America, Italy, Brazil, Portugal, Russia and Germany.

The premise was simple. Most folk, when offered a box of chocolates, go for the same one every time. That choice determines your chocolate personality.

"Soft caramel people observe a lot – they don't miss much," says Langham. "Hard caramel types are pedantic and always right. Coconuts can have their head in the sand and they don't sit still for long. Brazil nuts are standoff-ish. Peanuts are very busy people. And hazelnuts are homebodies."

It may seem frivolous to some, but *Chocolate Therapy* soon landed in the lap of Joanne Harris, author of the successful *Chocolat* novel that was made into a feature film starring Juliette Binoche and Johnny Depp. Binoche used *Chocolate Therapy* to help prepare for her award-winning role as a chocolatier in the film, and has even given Bill and Hillary Clinton a copy of the book as a thank you gift when staying at the White House.

The success of the book and their own obsession with chocolate led Langham and Simpson to write a second book titled *Hot Chocolate*, a chocolate relationships self-help book published in 1999. They then launched their own brand of chocolate, Schoc Choc, in 2002.

Traditionalists at heart, they started with only 15 savoury flavours produced from the back of a shop front they rented for NZ\$50 (\$38) a week in Greytown. Their signature pouch-style packaging was born of a necessity to keep the costs down.

"It was cheaper for us to print it off our computer, wrap the paper in plastic and roll up the chocolate tablets in the pouch than to get the packaging produced," says Langham, who used a \$10,000 loan originally intended for a new car to set up the business.



Sea salt chocolate and cardamom chocolate were, and still are, their signature flavours. The company has since grown to produce 58 varieties – including lavender, frankincense, pink peppercorn, French damask rose, lemon and cracked pepper, lime chilli and smoked paprika – captured in white, milk, dark and bittersweet chocolate in various grades ranging from 27 per cent cocoa mass to the bitter, sugarless 100 per cent.

Cocoa beans are sourced from Tanzania, Java, Papua New Guinea and beyond, and fruits used with the chocolate are dried in their own production room, which has recently doubled in size to meet demand.





Lime Chilli Schoc Choc

“It’s labour-intensive,” says Langham, “but for us, it’s all about flavour – it has to be right and to do that, we need to do it ourselves. When we started, I didn’t even know there were different grades of chocolate. I knew I wanted the best we could find.

“We started with top-grade chocolate from Belgium and we’ve stuck with it. We don’t add any fondants and we don’t use preservatives. When you start using butters and creams for centres, you reduce the shelf life and can’t control the flavour long-term.

“SCHOC CHOC does have a range of handmade chocolates, including wasabi and ginger, and pinot noir and sauvignon blanc sourced from New Zealand’s finest wineries,” explains Murray. “Their shelf life is shorter, so we are very selective about who we allow to stock these.”

Langham says that Schoc Choc has increased sales by 75 per cent every year since launching and have since opened an espresso chocolate bar in downtown Wellington, the cuisine capital of New Zealand, where foodie residents are very picky. They can afford to be – the city has

more cafés per capita than New York City.

Wellington was a good choice for Schoc Choc. It’s also home to film director Peter Jackson’s Weta Works studios, where the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy was created. Hollywood star, Adrien Brody, is a true Schoc Choc fan after discovering the store in Greytown while filming Jackson’s *King Kong*. Langham continues to send him ‘care packages’ to keep his addiction satiated.



Tequila Lime Salt Schoc Choc

It doesn’t stop there. *Wallpaper** and *Condé Nast* darling, The Spire Hotel, in Queenstown on New Zealand’s South Island, asked to stock the brand in their private hotel. The swanky six-star Wharekauhau Lodge uses Schoc Choc to tempt their own guests, while the Essential Deli and Rocket Kitchen – both in Auckland – stock Schoc Choc, as does the Cellar Door in Singapore.

“We don’t actively market the brand, simply because we’re so hands-on with little spare time,” says Langham, who divides his time between running ‘Chocolate Therapy’ seminars for delegates wishing to empower their lives with chocolate, and managing chocolate production for the two retail outlets. There are plans for the business to grow further with some financial investment, and there is talk of a third book in the pipeline.

For now, chocoholics can find Langham and Simpson in the Schoc headquarters in Greytown, where it all began, or choose to sup on espresso while indulging in Schoc Chocs in the Tory Street, Wellington, store. Ask to try the mystery flavours and be presented with samples of chunky shavings of chocolate from five different flavours. You don’t win a prize if you get them right, but if you’re quick with the hands, you’ll get a healthy dose of complimentary chocolate. Who can refuse that? ■