

BEAN TO BAR



A Scituate Couple dares to be different by producing distinctive, stone-ground chocolate.

By Cheryl Fenton | Photography by Kris Marie Hughes-Craig

It only takes one bite to realize that [Taza Chocolate](https://www.tazachocolate.com/) isn't your typical candy. Instead of falling in line with other cocoa confections, it replaces the familiar melt-in-your-mouth creaminess with true grit. Perfectly imperfect, the rough texture is a welcome surprise.



<https://3mkexo1awrr142xt3225zmp8-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Taza-Chocolate-18.jpg> "Our stone-ground chocolate is unique," says Taza co-founder and Scituate Harbor resident Alex Whitmore. "Its rustic texture brings out the bold flavors of cacao beans in a way that waxy-smooth European-style chocolate can't."

This grittiness—the result of stone-grinding cacao (cocoa) beans and blending with Brazilian cane sugar—is Taza's calling card. The chocolate is certified organic, non-GMO, non-dairy and gluten- and soy-free. The absence of milk translates to dark and decadent, while large cane crystals create a sparkle that puts standard Hershey squares to shame.

Norwell native Kathleen Fulton, Whitmore's wife and Taza co-founder/brand manager, calls the stone-ground process a double-edged sword. "It tastes wildly different than any other chocolate out there. Some people love it and some people hate it," says Fulton. "It's a polarizing product and that doesn't make it easy, but we don't like easy, so it works for us. And we love it."

Channeling 1,000-year-old traditions of Mexican chocolate making in their Somerville factory, Oaxacan molinos (millstones) are used to create a radically unrefined dark chocolate with bold flavors of cacao (pronounced cay-cow). Each 60-pound granite stone is hand-carved with a special pattern. The grooves pulverize the roasted beans into a thick paste. This “cocoa liquor” is blended with sugar for sweetness and add-ins for different flavors (think nuts, seeds, spices or fruit oils).

TAZA'S BEGINNING

Whitmore had his first taste of stone-ground chocolate in 2005 in Oaxaca, Mexico. This experience over a decade ago is now synonymous with Taza, quite literally. He was enjoying a taza de chocolate (a cup of hot cocoa), and with its rich flavor and granular finish, it was love at first sip. Then came his ah-ha moment.

While someone less savvy would have simply stockpiled bars of Mexican stone-ground chocolate into their suitcase and called it a day, Whitmore became inspired.

“The way most people think of chocolate is so one-dimensional compared to what I discovered as I started to dig deeper and travel to more farms and meet different producers,” he explains. As evidenced by a whirlwind career path, Whitmore doesn't do one-dimensional well. From serving as Walter Cronkite's boat captain to packing parachutes for skydivers, he's always up for a challenge. It was only natural for him to gravitate toward something as thrilling as upping the ante on everyone's favorite treat—chocolate.



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Visitors to the Taza factory can smell the sweet aroma of chocolate as they learn about the chocolate making process, from roasting to wrapping. Oaxacan molinos (millstones) are used to create an unrefined dark chocolate with bold flavors of cacao. Each 60-pound granite stone is hand-carved with grooves that pulverize the roasted beans into a thick paste.

Whitmore returned to the States with the stone-ground concept in his mind and authentic rotary stone mills in his possession. Those original stones are still in use at his factory today.

“I got excited about making chocolate from scratch. I started learning about how complex chocolate really was and how amazing cacao trees are,” he says. “I got sucked into this entire world I didn't know existed.”

Subsequent trips to Mexico sealed the deal, as Whitmore learned more about the local food milling tradition. He apprenticed under a molinero (miller) in Oaxaca to learn how to hand-carve, dress and operate granite millstones to make chocolate. “It's not like a blender where you push the 'on' button. You need to know how to cut and tighten the stones, how to smell the product to make sure it's right.” <https://3mkexo1awrr142xt3225zmp8-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Taza-Chocolate-3.jpg>



Taza's business plan began in October 2005 and yielded its first stone-

ground chocolate bar—a Cinnamon Chocolate Mexicano Disc—on Valentine’s Day of 2007. Now, a decade later, they transform 15,000 pounds of chocolate into 96,000 bars each week, which are sold online and in Whole Foods Markets, Wegmans and other retailers around the country.



For dark chocolate purists, the classic single-origin bars are minimally processed to allow the nuances of the country-specific beans to come through, as in the 84 percent Dark Haiti or 77 percent Dark Belize. Taza’s Amaze bars mix flavors into the cacao such as the Coconut Almond, Raspberry Crunch and their Sea Salt & Almond Bar, while the authentic Taza Chocolate Mexicano Discs boast 85 percent super dark chocolate with kicks like guajillo chili, chipotle or cinnamon.

DIRECT TRADE TRANSPARENCY

Taza is not only impacting the local chocolate scene with its distinctive taste, but also the farming world with its distinctive sourcing practices. As the first chocolate maker in the United States to establish a third-party certified Direct Trade Cacao Certification program, Taza is a true pioneer in ethical cacao sourcing. They maintain direct relationships with cacao farmers who respect the workers’ rights and the environment.



<https://3mkexo1awrr142xt3225zmp8-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Taza-Chocolate-35.jpg>“I wanted to start a company where I could be proud to go to work every day,” says Whitmore. “Back when we started, it was hard to just buy cacao beans. If you did, you were probably talking to a broker in New York and you didn’t know where the beans were coming from or their quality. We wanted to make sure we were getting high-quality cacao. Going directly to the origin is really critical for us.”

Rather than just plugging into the Fair Trade program, which Whitmore didn’t think captured all the work they were doing, Taza created their own program. Today they pay premium prices for quality product and remain completely transparent about their sources and practices. Translation: you know where the cacao is coming from. The beans go straight from farms in the Dominican Republic, Bolivia, Belize, Ecuador and Haiti to the Somerville factory. Whitmore checks in annually with the farmers to ensure all is up to snuff.

Visitors get the next best thing to a South American farm visit through guided tours of the Taza factory. A warm chocolate aroma accompanies you, as you learn the process, from roasting to wrapping. A maze of pipes carries melted chocolate across the ceiling, adding a Willy Wonka wonderland

appeal. The factory store sells bars, nutrient-dense cacao shell compost and local products made with Taza ingredients, including teas and jams.

Chocolate lovers can also experience Taza at their [Boston Public Market](https://bostonpublicmarket.org/) location, where experts mill chocolate and whip it into delicious drinks that pair perfectly with a crispy churro.

A FAMILY VENTURE

Taza is a true team effort. Whitmore is the self-proclaimed “crazy chocolate idea guy” and Fulton is the brand-building authority. The duo commutes from their South Shore home to the factory via the commuter rail and bike power. When they aren’t cycling through the weekday traffic grind, the whole family finds quiet times on the shores of their own hometown. A South Shore native, Fulton introduced Whitmore to all the hidden secrets in the area around Scituate, where she grew up, <https://3mkexo1awrr142xt3225zmp8-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Taza-Chocolate-29.jpg>

“Peggotty was the closest beach to my house growing up, but it became even more important when it came to introducing Alex to the South Shore,” says Fulton, remembering their move from Somerville back to her old stomping grounds. “He’s a surfer and didn’t believe there was surfing on the South Shore. When I was a couple months pregnant with our first, Cora, I brought him to Peggotty when there was a swell and he was hooked.” Whitmore’s latest obsession is kiteboarding, and there are always trips on their family boat in Scituate Harbor.

With the sea right outside their door, the family often shakes things up with mountain



escapes for hiking and exploring. May brought about a new Taza line called Dark Bark that fits perfectly into their backpacks during trail blazing moments. Considered snacking chocolate, they're stone ground 80 percent dark chocolate with add-ins like toasted coconut, peppermint, almonds or pumpkin seeds.



The couple's daughters, 5-year-old Cora and 3-year-old Sloane, are always ready to fill up their snack bags with Taza treats.

"They try to get their hands on [chocolate] all the time at home," laughs Whitmore. "We have to keep it tucked away. Every one of us eats chocolate every day, almost religiously."

And why wouldn't they? They have an eternal Golden Ticket.



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