



Rum and chocolate Tobago tours

By MELISSA DASSRATH Sunday, January 27 2008

The bittersweet symphony of Caribbean rum and chocolate is a decadent duo that is enticing Europeans to tour Tobago. These Rum and Chocolate Tasting Tours have become the latest sensation of Agro-Culinary Tourism, attracting visitors to the tourism-based isle while simultaneously stirring up a revival of the local cocoa industry.

Although a sommelier or wine steward by profession, Duane Dove, acquired a sweet tooth for rum and chocolates. On Tuesday, he spoke at the first ever "Rejuvenation of Cocoa in Tobago" conference. His role was to share his story of sweet success, spark enthusiasm and hopefully to inspire or entice a new generation of cocoa farmers.

The 38-year-old Tobagonian-born chocolate connoisseur, Dove stated: "The world is currently experiencing a renaissance of dark rum and dark chocolates. In the past four years, dark chocolate has taken the market by storm. Right now the world market is crying for cocoa and Tobago is desperately trying to market their cocoa internationally."

European artisan chocolate houses like the Spanish Chocovich, French Pralus and Valrhona Gran Couva and Italian Amedei, have turned chocolate into an artform. For a 100 Euros a bar, these Rolls Royce of chocolatiers, only source the finest cocoa beans of the Trinitario variety, grown on Trinidad and Tobago estates, to make their premium chocolates. He explained that some very prestigious European chocolate houses are vying for our local cocoa, but we simply do not produce enough. "Certain foreign chocolate artisans are interested in our cocoa for its supreme quality, but the tonnage is a problem. If we do not get our tonnage up, we risk losing our 'fine flavour' stamp."

After travelling the world to visit various chocolate houses to study the art of making quality chocolate, he settled in Stockholm, Sweden and opened the upscale Swiss chocolate shop "Small Island Chocolates and Coffee". Like the artisan chocolatiers, all of his chocolates are crafted from the finest Trinitario cocoa beans, pure cocoa butter, coarse brown sugar and fresh vanilla beans.

Working as a consultant for a European branch of the Tourism Development Company as well as a representative for the Cocoa and Coffee Board of Trinidad and Tobago and Angostura, he promoted local rum and cocoa at food festivals across the globe.

"Seeing the potential for the local cocoa industry and getting into the market, I approached the THA about acquiring a cocoa estate," Dove explained. So five years ago, he started planting his own cocoa trees to be used as a raw ingredient for his chocolate shop. "I have achieved the value-added quality, by having my own cocoa estate, producing my own cocoa and creating my own chocolates."

Out of Dove's desire to tempt the world with Tobago cocoa, the idea to organise rum and chocolate tasting tours to Tobago was developed. These tours have gained popularity with tourists from Sweden, Norway, Finland, Holland and Germany.

In the wintery months between December and April, European travel is at its peak. Dove highlighted another reason why his tours appeal to Europeans tourists. "The Scandinavians and Dutch are generally more adventurous people. They prefer rugged vacations whereas the English and North Americans prefer all-inclusive resorts."

Visitors have the chance to experience a piece of Tobago's cocoa history, as well as the future of chocolate, with excursions to his Tobago Cocoa Estate nestled in Roxborough, that end in a classic creole dinner and rum and chocolate tasting.

Sugar cane, rum, coffee and cocoa originated in the tropics and during the Colonial era became a major commodity. He explained how the tours take tourists on a journey through the West Indies Sugar Trade and stages of rum and cocoa production: "The tours are very informative. They trail through cocoa trees and get an interactive look at aspects of harvesting, moisture-content and fermentation of the beans."

The tasting sessions combine the elements of a Speyside sunset, Caribbean dark rum and the finest European chocolate created from TT's own Trinitario cocoa. When barrel-aged rum is married with premium artisan dark chocolates it is a euphoric experience. The silky bittersweet block melts on the tongue and the aged rum slips down the throat like satin with a lingering sensation of decadence.

When asked how visitors have responded to the tour, Dove smiled. "They love it. The greenery, the ocean and the hands-on experience just takes them to a whole new level."