



Craft chocolate made close to home

When indulging in a Patric Chocolate bar, the key word is *nibble*. Consisting only of cocoa beans and cane sugar, one small taste fills your mouth like a flood. Alan McClure is the founder of Patric Chocolate in Columbia, Mo., and he's one of only a handful of microbatch chocolatiers in America.

"Europeans don't really like our chocolate," he explained, standing next to his burlap bags of Madagascan cacao (pronounced ka-COW). "That's one of the things I'm trying to change."

Making chocolate from "bean to bar" – versus using finished chocolate to make confections, aka "bar to bonbon" – takes a lot of time. First, the chocolatier must sift through the cacao to remove anything that poses a threat to the finished product: small or broken beans, feathers, rocks, leaves.

Once the separation process ends, it's time to roast the cacao to release the flavor. Then the roasted beans are cracked, separated by size and dumped into the winnower – which, to my disappointment, was the only piece of Willy Wonka-esque equipment in McClure's small building. His winnower is an

8½-foot-tall machine that de-shells the beans. As the cacao falls through its main tube, the flaky testa, or outer shell of the bean, is sucked upward and out. Good-to-go nibs, or nuts, exit through another opening at the base.

The nibs of the bean are then placed in machine called a refiner/conche, which spins to transform the nibs (along with their natural cocoa butter) into a thick flowing liquid. At this point cane sugar is added, and the dark, yummy goodness continues to twirl around in the refiner/conche for about four days.

The chocolate is then molded into large – for lack of a better word – ugly blocks to age for three months or, if necessary, longer. After this period, the chocolate is melted back down and pumped into molds. Shiny bars are then hand-wrapped in gold foil (I know you want to sing it right now), placed in the Patric package, and sent off to tempt your taste buds with rich bittersweetness and hints of berries and citrus. More information is at www.patric-chocolate.com.

– K.M. May