

# BITTER SWEET





Child slavery and poor working conditions are just a few reasons consumers are questioning whether or not chocolate is right for their ethically based diets. VegNews writer **Marla Rose** investigates the bitter truth behind this cherished food.

## Perhaps no single word in the English language evokes opulent luxury as much as “chocolate.”

And rightfully so. The versatile sweet is connected to memories both precious and painful (ie, romantic dinners and break-ups), comforting us on cold nights in the form of hot cocoa while providing sentimental reminders of our childhoods whenever we get a whiff of a freshly-baked brownie. Chocolate transforms bad days into good nights, elevates great moments to the sublime, provides a toothsome diversion from the daily grind, and boosts us when we’re feeling enervated. Like a parent, chocolate is there for us, shape-shifting to meet our needs. Whether pauper or aristocrat, we turn to chocolate to make this sometimes harsh world a bit more palatable.

With more than three million tons of chocolate produced each year worldwide and \$98 billion in sales, the rich treat—in all its various permutations—has wedged its way into our cupboards, purses, and freezers. But for something that has been such an intimate and important part of so many lives, chocolate’s origins, history, and its present-day status are cloaked in controversy. Cocoa trees can grow only in a limited geographic range approximately 20 degrees to the north and south of the equator, and were originally planted by Europeans in the West Indies and the Philippines, as well as Asia and the Gold Coast of West Africa (specifically in Ghana and Ivory Coast). Ironically, though, most laborers in the West African cocoa industry have never tasted the finished product because this everyday delicacy is still out of reach for much of the world, including those who toil to produce it.

### The bitter truth

More than 70 percent of the world’s cocoa originates in Western Africa, where many laborers in the industry perform what is described as “hazardous work”—clearing land; working long hours; handling agricultural chemicals in the form of fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides without adequate protection; carrying heavy loads;

and using dangerous instruments such as machetes to cut cocoa pods from the trees they've climbed—are children from Ivory Coast and Ghana working to help support their families. The most fortunate are able to live at home, but there are also those who have been brought in from impoverished neighboring countries such as Burkina Faso and Mali, their destitute families having been deceived by traffickers into believing they'd be cared for and would earn a decent wage on cocoa plantations. Other children are abducted outright by traffickers and may never see their families again.

According to a Tulane University report, approximately 2.6 million children between

abuse, and arduous labor. Quite literally, these children will continue to struggle beneath the 100-pound sacks they carry so we can enjoy a soon-forgotten chocolate ice cream cone.

### Chocolate & veganism

For Lauren Ornelas, a longtime social-justice activist and founder of the Food Empowerment Project (FEP)—an organization working to create a more just and sustainable world by recognizing the power of one's food choices—learning about the less appetizing side of the cocoa industry meant she could no longer ignore the hidden cruelties of the chocolate trade. "In 2000, I saw a segment on TV with a slave who escaped from the cacao

scrupulously avoid products that include ingredients of animal origin, once we learn about the entrenched culture of cruelty behind the scenes of cocoa production, it's easy to see how our chocolate choices warrant a similar scrutiny and diligence. Our principles insist that there is no exploitation of cows in the chocolate we purchase, but what about exploitation of some of the most vulnerable people in the world?

### Raising the bar

While millions of West African children suffer from conditions the International Labour Organization's Convention 182 calls the Worst Forms of Child Labor, social-justice activists are working to change this problem. The goal, many say, is getting the major chocolate companies to address the ways in which they contribute to the culture of abuse within the industry. In 2001, US Representative Eliot Engel (D-NY) introduced an amendment to an agricultural bill that would allocate funds for a new label to identify cocoa products grown and harvested without child labor. The amendment was approved by the House of Representatives and was on its way to the Senate before the Chocolate Manufacturers Association—which hired former senators George Mitchell and Bob Dole to lobby against the bill's passage—struck a deal to negotiate rather than allow the label to come to pass. The signing on of Senator Tom Harkin effectively watered down the original labeling effort, which has become known as the Harkin-Engel Protocol.

Drafted and signed in 2001, the Harkin-Engel Protocol aims to partner governments, the international cocoa industry, producers, workers, and non-governmental organizations to eliminate the worst forms of child labor (and forced adult labor) by 70

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the ages of five and 17 are laboring on cocoa plantations in Ivory Coast and Ghana. As Abby McGill, director of campaigns at the International Labor Rights Forum, a Washington, DC-based organization that has been working on bringing this issue to the public for more than a decade, puts it, "War, poverty, and disease work together to make a desperate and mobile population."

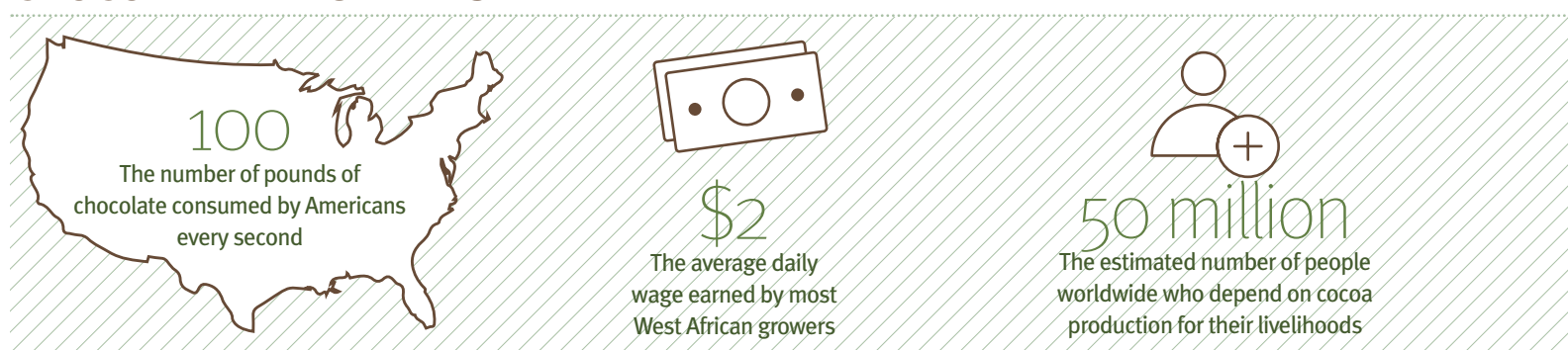
Furthermore, our collective hunger for inexpensive chocolate is growing as countries throughout the world are developing a taste for the delectable indulgence. This chocolate expansion means big dollars for corporations, but for West African children exploited by the cocoa industry, this development only furthers their lack of education, low wages, and daily exposure to hazardous conditions,

fields," Ornelas says. "He said, 'When you eat chocolate, you are eating my flesh.' As a vegan who believes in fighting for justice, I knew I could never look at chocolate the same way again."

Tracking this industry for years, Ornelas has no illusions about the abuses within the trade. "Children as young as seven years old have been reported using machetes," she says. "Even on certified farms, children have been beaten severely for trying to escape. The bodies of slaves who have escaped have scars all over their backs. They are locked in at night."

As ethical consumers, many of us take special care to research and source our purchases. Just as we refuse to support companies that use animal testing and

## CHOCOLATE BY NUMBERS





Cacao beans are cut from trees using large poles or machetes, often by children working to support their families.



Beans are raked for up to a week before being dried in the sun.



There are numerous ways to mold chocolate into different shapes and sizes for packaging and consumption.

percent in West Africa's cocoa industry. A voluntary agreement, the pact is not designed to end all child labor, but reduce what is considered the worst of it. Even with this diminished goal, though, reform measures are proving to be disappointingly out of reach. Given the deep pockets of the companies that have signed the protocol—including Guittard, Hershey, Mars, and Nestlé—it cannot be overlooked that more progress toward paying cocoa farmers a living wage, an issue many consider the largest in addressing the worst of the exploitation, is not being made. For example, according to Tulane's 2010 report, for the protocol to meet its remediation goals, more than 97 percent of cocoa-growing communities in Ivory Coast and 84 percent in Ghana would still need to be reached. No forced adult-labor remediation interventions are in place in either country.

"The first deadline for the protocol was 2005, then 2008, then 2010, and the new one is 2020," McGill says. "The problem is that there is no legally binding mechanism that will force the companies to address the issues.

Building schools and helping farmers are good things, but they are not systematically designed to ensure anything for improving life for the cocoa farmers, which is the root cause of the problem. The companies will need to be accountable, but without acknowledging responsibility for the specific problems happening in their supply chain, it's just an acknowledgement that the problem exists."

Still, there is movement toward change coming from a place where the industry might feel it the most: the financial bottom line. The 9th District Circuit Court of Appeals has recently ruled that three former child slaves from Mali can sue Nestlé, ADM, and Cargill for aiding and abetting child slavery in Ivory Coast and Ghana, and, further, that these firms may have tolerated slavery to keep production costs low (Hershey's is facing a similar suit from a different claimant), overruling a 2010 court decision stating that US courts did not have jurisdiction for human-rights violations by corporations that occur outside of the US borders. "Driven by the goal to reduce costs in any way possible," US Circuit Court

## History of Chocolate

The 2007 discovery in Honduras of pottery with cocoa residue has helped anthropologists trace our experimentation with the fruit of the trees back to at least 1400 BCE. Originally native to Mesoamerica, these cocoa trees provided the first chocolate drink, which was a fermented alcoholic beverage made with the sweet pulp of the pods. The Olmecs of south-central Mexico become enamored with the beans, developing the process of fermentation, drying, roasting, and grinding that still forms the basis of chocolate production today. Later, the beans were frothed with water, chiles, and spices for the storied beverage enjoyed by the Mayan and Aztec elite (and those on their way to become human sacrifices). According to legend, when the Aztec king Moctezuma II offered his beloved drink to Spanish invader Hernán Cortés, the conqueror found it to be wholly unpalatable due to its signature bitterness. Once cane sugar was added, the beverage took on a completely new flavor dimension and quickly spread in popularity across Spain. By the 17th century, the rest of Europe began experimenting with cocoa, and it soon took on the sweet, creamy, and solid-bar qualities associated with modern chocolate.

400  
The number of cocoa beans  
required to make one pound of  
finished chocolate



\$98  
billion  
The projected global sales  
figure for chocolate in 2016

## Chocolate101

While chocolate goes down smooth, getting our favorite sweet to our mouths isn't nearly as easy. In fact, the transformation of the cocoa tree into a delicious candy bar is a nine-step process that requires felling trees, fermentation, molding, and shipping. Here's what it takes to get a chocolate bar onto store shelves.

**STEP 1: Harvesting** Pods are cut from cocoa trees with machetes or long poles with sharp edges.

**STEP 2: Bean extraction** Beans are evaluated for quality, split in half with a machete or mallet, and removed.

**STEP 3: Fermentation** Beans are placed between leaves or sacks for up to six days to stop the germination and help develop the flavor.

**STEP 4: Drying** Laid out on large mats or tarps, beans are raked for up to a week to dry in the sun.

**STEP 5: Winnowing** At the processor, bitter husks are removed from the cacao nib, which will be used to make the chocolate.

**STEP 6: Ground** Nibs are ground into a paste called chocolate liquor or mass, which is either used as-is, or further processed into cocoa butter.

**STEP 7: Conching** Chocolate liquor and cocoa butter are mixed and aerated with other ingredients such as sugar and vanilla.

**STEP 8: Tempering** Chocolate is cooled and warmed until it reaches a uniform crystallization of ingredients. Additional ingredients such as nuts, dried fruit, and flavorings are added.

**STEP 9: Molded and shipped** Finally, melted chocolate is poured into molds. Once solid, it is wrapped, labeled, packed, and stacked for shipping.

of Appeals judge Dorothy Wright Nelson wrote, "the defendants allegedly supported the use of child slavery, the cheapest form of labor available."

### Signs of hope?

While efforts to change the status quo of the chocolate industry are in place, there are alternatives for chocolate produced without human exploitation. For starters, the Latin American cocoa industry shows no evidence

deciding whether or not to buy a product or support a company.

Originally conceived in the 1940s by religious and charitable organizations, the Fair Trade movement gained momentum in the 1960s as a way to challenge the exploitative trade model by supporting small farmers and sellers with progressive, labor-friendly business practices. Sadly, this concept is not guaranteed, as instances of illegal child labor on a Fair Trade-certified cooperative

## There are other signs of hope for those of us who like our chocolate without a troubled conscience.

of child or slave labor. Furthermore, according to the International Cocoa Organization, of the small market for certified organic cocoa production (less than 0.5 percent of world production), most comes from Latin America and demand is growing at a swift pace, with sales increasing from \$171 million in 2002 to \$304 million in 2005.

Labels from one of several certifying bodies, specifically the label designating a product as "Fair Trade," have been enacted to help chocolate enthusiasts determine which brands are produced without human exploitation. In theory, Fair Trade ensures more equitable international trade agreements, a better program for sustainability, and a living wage for producers and laborers along the supply chain. As with the misleading or outright fraudulent marketing used by animal agribusiness, though, activists watching the chocolate industry fear that the Fair Trade label might give consumers a false sense of security when

in Ghana (which resulted in the suspension of several suppliers), and a controversy in 2011 when farms certified by UTZ Certified and Rainforest Alliance—labels focused on sustainability that also purport to designate chocolate that is free of exploitative labor practices—were discovered to have child laborers. There is also the charge from worker cooperative Equal Exchange that the certifying body Fair Trade USA (formerly known as TransFair) is lowering standards, cutting farmers out of its governance model, and certifying large plantations.

A recent development in the movement toward a more ethical chocolate industry is the concept of Direct Trade with growers. With one-on-one engagement, greater transparency, and accountability, Direct Trade chocolate companies work with cocoa farmers and collectives rather than brokers to ensure higher pay and profit sharing for those who grow the cocoa beans. For bean-to-bar company Askinosie Chocolate, Direct Trade

## CHOCOLATE BY NUMBERS



The estimated amount of a chocolate bar's value that goes to marketing, research, and development to promote chocolate and bring new confections to consumers



The percentage Fair Trade chocolate represents in the global chocolate industry

practices are the most consistently principled option for its products and as a way to sidestep concerns about Fair Trade.

"There is a huge cost to farmers who want their small farms certified Fair Trade," Askinosie Chocolate founder Shawn Askinosie says. "We feel Direct Trade is a better approach: it is knowing and having a relationship with our suppliers, whom we refer to as our 'farmer partners' because that is who they are. In Tanzania, those Direct Trade farmer relationships have allowed us to partner with local schools to support programs for empowering girls, drill a water well, buy textbooks and computers, build classrooms, and the list goes on."

### Ethical chocolate

There are other signs of hope for those of us who like our chocolate without a troubled conscience. Ornelas's FEP has made sourcing ethically produced cocoa easier than ever with its thoroughly researched and up-to-date list of recommended companies (see "Good Bar"). There is also a small but growing number of chocolatiers who sidestep the cruelty of the dairy industry as well as cruel labor practices. One such producer, Sjaak's Organic Chocolates in Petaluma, CA, is an inspiring story of a family-operated business that does not require the compromising of ethics while maintaining high standards for its products. Owned by Dutch-born, European-trained confectioner Jacques Holten, Sjaak's (Jacques in Dutch) is raising the bar for ethical practices within the chocolate industry. A longtime vegetarian, Holten went vegan four years ago, prompting the family to phase out milk from its chocolates. This was a risky endeavor given that Sjaak's had an established and loyal customer base, but Jessica Holten-Casper, head of sales at Sjaak's, says the move was "a

risk worth taking to do the right thing."

Holten worked hard to develop chocolates that met his exacting standards and emulated the creaminess of dairy chocolates, and found most of his customers still enjoyed the products while forming a new audience with vegan- and dairy-free chocolate lovers.

### Conscious consumption

Some chocolate-exploitation experts believe no West African cocoa is ethical because the culture of worker abuse and forced child labor is too pervasive and a lack of transparency keeps us from knowing exactly what practices we are supporting with our dollars.

"A majority of chocolate comes from Western Africa where the worst forms of child labor—including slavery—are prevalent," Ornelas says. "As of now, as an organization, we cannot recommend chocolate sourced from Western Africa, with a few exceptions." Others believe that given how impoverished Ghana and Ivory Coast are and how vital this industry is to its economies, supporting smaller, more progressive businesses using West African cocoa is a better way to vote with one's dollars.

"They need these jobs," McGill says. "These are two of the poorest countries and cocoa is a massively successful industry. The profits should just be equally shared along the entire production chain."

All agree that small producers, not just the powerful corporations and its stakeholders, need to have a say regarding price determination in order to begin to unravel the scourge of child slavery. In addition, the companies that have benefitted from this very imbalanced power structure and free labor must contribute to remediation efforts in West Africa.

In the meantime, conscious consumers

## GoodBar

One of the best resources for ethical chocolate consumers is the renowned Chocolate List provided by Food Empowerment Project. Available as a free app and online at [foodispower.org/chocolate-list](http://foodispower.org/chocolate-list), the guide provides the most recent research on companies that offer chocolates produced without human slave-labor. Here are 10 of our favorite ethical vegan chocolate brands.

- Alter Eco
- Artisana
- Equal Exchange
- Fearless Chocolate Company
- Gnosis
- NibMore
- Pascha
- Righteously Raw
- Sjaak's Chocolate
- Theo Chocolate

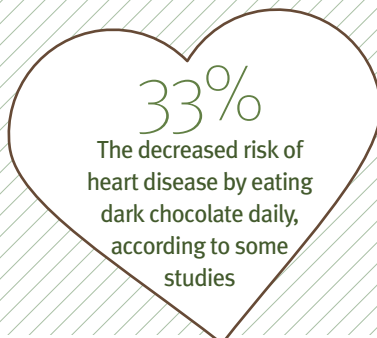
need to aim for a higher standard of consistency. We can examine our purchasing habits, and we can support the producers we know to be selling truly cruelty-free chocolate. When we do this, we can finally enjoy chocolate again without a troubled conscience. **VN**

**Marla Rose** is a writer and co-founder of [veganstreet.com](http://veganstreet.com), a website and shop dedicated to creating innovative, effective, and thought-provoking materials to help build a more compassionate world.



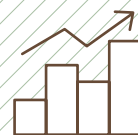
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The pounds consumed per capita each year by the Swiss, the world's largest consumers of chocolate



33%

The decreased risk of heart disease by eating dark chocolate daily, according to some studies



55%

The increase in chocolate eaten by people when they are depressed