



## Chocolate Maker Steve Prickett

By Brian D'Ambrosio

Steve Prickett, owner and founder of Eldora Chocolate in Albuquerque, is among a small group of culinary artists escalating the prestige of craft chocolate and the integrity with which it is made. A chocolate maker, as opposed to a chocolatier, Prickett purchases unrefined cacao beans and then processes, roasts, treats, and mills them into chocolate. Most people who work with chocolate do not start directly from the cacao bean in the way that he does.

"We as chocolate makers have to educate the public better," Prickett said. "A chocolatier is someone making chocolate. The texture, the flavor, and the ingredients are all set and pre-made. They melt it down and turn it into pretty shapes. I'm a chocolate maker. ... In the U.S., there are about 700 chocolate makers and about 17,000 chocolatiers. Why are there so few? It's too hard to make the chocolate from scratch and tease it out."

Prickett opened Eldora Chocolate in June 2018, and since then has deepened his commitment to

producing the very best products, sticking to the highest standards, and finding real ingredients, no matter the time, travel, or expense involved.

Prickett said he has been a connoisseur of fine chocolate for at least 20 years and was troubled when he realized that genuine chocolate was becoming something of a scarce resource.

About 10 years ago, he and his wife, Andrea, took a tour of a chocolate production operation in Hawaii, where he was introduced to the various fermentation and drying techniques of the cacao bean. After the visit, he purchased a bundle of home manufacturing equipment and experimented with chocolate making as a hobby.

However, the side gig soon took top priority after Prickett, then a Merrill Lynch financial advisor, was offered an irresistible amount for his practice.

"When I accepted the offer, my plan was to work out of the house and give the chocolate away," Prickett said. "But I became relentless. And I figured that I could make it as a business. ... You might call it all a failed retirement."

He found a half-acre lot at 8114

Edith Blvd. NE, razed the existing building and erected a certified kitchen, with his wife as interior designer of the shop's relaxed, open space.

"We've got nothing to hide," Prickett said. "We use all real ingredients. The big, industrialized guys have big walls and you can only see so much of their process. We aim to show every step."

### Bean-to-Bar Ethics

Most bean-to-bar companies like Prickett's are small operations, incomparable to the annual production amounts of well-recognized companies like Hershey's and Nestle. Instead of buying beans for quantity or volume, boutique crafter tend to prioritize the quality and taste of the bean, as well as the ethics behind the merchandise.

Indeed, Prickett likens the bean-to-bar movement and the ideology nurturing it as similar to the successful proliferation of the small-batch, micro-brewing or craft brewing beer industries. Small, craft beer production has managed to acquire approximately 15 percent to 20 percent of the beer drinking market share in the U.S.

"If we could move the needle from 2 to 3 percent market share of the chocolate industry, I feel like we could be in the forefront of that trend," Prickett said. "But legacy is working against us."

Indeed, the massive imprint and influence of titanic chocolate conglomerates seems insurmountable. These operations are based on economy and volume, as well as on the rigidity and homogenization of taste. Big, industrialized chocolate producers process to obtain one general flavor. However, there are actually about 200 flavors in chocolate, and that's what Prickett creates with characteristic zeal: He finds chocolate and teases out those countless flavors.

### Worldwide Flavor Wheel

Eldora Chocolate sources its inventory from all over the world, including Belize, Bolivia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Madagascar, Mexico, Tanzania, Uganda, and Venezuela. Such sourcing puts Prickett in contact with a number of the finest cacao farmers in the world, all of whom are working within about 20 degrees north or south of the equator. Beyond that latitude, the cacao tree cannot find the necessary environmental elements to prosper.

It's more than just the genetics of the cacao tree that determines and influences the taste of the bean, which varies from farmer to farmer, field



to field. It's the land, the farmer, the weather, and the fermentation and drying techniques, for starters.

Such diversity of variables ensures a chocolate flavor wheel that is expansive - from floral (hibiscus, rose, honeysuckle) and fruity (mango, banana, pineapple, blueberry, and raspberry) to nutty, earthy, smoky, acidity, fruity, sweet (cane sugar, maple, coconut palm), and citrus (lemon, orange, and tangerine). Other flavors include herbal, woody, coffee-roasted, astringent, and dairy. Textures range from buttery or grainy, to streaking or creamy.

Perhaps not surprisingly, a range of countries specialize in a wide choice of beans. For example, Vietnam is known for its fruity, spicy chocolate; Papua, New Guinea, is known for smoky; Tanzania, roasty; Peru, tangy; while Ecuador breeds floral tastings, and Venezuela cultivates many nutty varieties.

After Prickett acquires the beans in their raw state, the bean-to-bar methods that pilot from there are straightforward. In just a few steps Prickett works the beans through the chocolate-making process to administer the best, most chocolaty flavor possible, adding one or two ingredients, such as sugar or cacao butter, and never putting in fillers that large-scale producers use.

Prickett narrows the chocolate-tasting experience to just a dozen or so words, such as tight, weak, intense, complex (like a bouquet of flowers), and industrial (chocolatey notes, offbeat flavors).

"We've made chocolate from 33 countries and 53 origins around the world," Prickett said. "The reason for this is so that you could experience the taste difference from different regions."

Smell, he said, is a prime meter of the quality of the chocolate. If the smell is pervasive, nuanced, and vigorous, the chances are very good that the chocolate won't disappoint in taste either. If you could smell the chocolate from a few feet away, he said, that is a promising indication.

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