Discussion Guide

Summary

Everything about the Dancing Lion Chocolate cafe in Manchester, New Hampshire, sounds a tad pretentious. The edible art. The cutesy tile tables. The fact that the owner is called Richard Tango-Lowy. But the drinking chocolate ... now that, Rowan Jacobsen insists, with its subtle tobacco notes and hallmark bittersweet tang, is worth any amount of chakra-chanting.

But what is this "specialty" chocolate that has started appearing on our shelves, and who are the people putting it there? In a lively mix of grounded reportage and business writing, *Wild Chocolate* sets out to open the lid on this niche but fast-growing alternative to the Big Chocolate juggernaut. The first challenge for Jacobsen, who specializes in books about gastronomic oddities (previous subjects include oysters, truffles and "American terroir"), is to get beyond the jargon. Take the "Warm Spice Bar", a Dancing Lion favorite, priced at $30, whose packaging (handmade in Nepal, naturally) reads as follows: "Bolivia Itenez HCP, Heirloom No.2, wild harvest 62% dark milk chocolate with ginger, sapote seed, and Grenada nutmeg ... [it] makes me think of root beer on a hot day". To be fair, the story of heritage cocoa ("easier on English ears than 'cacao'") beans--prized by Mesoamerican cultures for millennia, then lost and "rediscovered", and now being picked and processed by forest-dwellers--is a marketeer's dream. But to Jacobsen's credit, the book treats "bean to bar" with cool-headed detachment.

The second challenge is to explain how, in a competitive multibillion-dollar market of global brands, wild-grown cocoa stands a chance. As the author's forays into the jungles of Central America and up Amazonian tributaries reveal, heirloom cocoa trees (these are any species older than Hershey's) like three things: forest shade, tropical climes and remote locations. They are also finickity. The pods require picking and fermenting at just the right state of ripeness and temperature, respectively. The same is true of the drying process: if done too slowly, they go moldy; too fast and the pulp rots inside the shell. In short, arriving at "different versions of gross" is easily done. Yet the best producers know how to make it work.

In a spirit of genuine curiosity and adventure, Jacobsen travels to meet these "choconerd" heroes: the German agroforestry expert in Bolivia who won big with a Swiss chocolatier, but ended up bankrupt all the same; the American college grad who became the world's largest specialty bean exporter after heading to Belize on a whim; the well-to-do Brazilian medical student turned chef who bet it all on making chocolate from deepest Amazonia. Their struggles against the odds are what gives *Wild Chocolate* its kick. In today's ever more faceless and commodified food system, Jacobsen shows that alternatives exist. His dancing lions, in other words, offer a ray of sugary hope.

Balch, Oliver. "WILD CHOCOLATE." TLS. Times Literary Supplement, no. 6360, 21 Feb. 2025, p. 24. Gale Literature Resource Center, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A828202011/LitRC?u=txshrpub100319&sid=bookmark-LitRC&xid=fb714afd. Accessed 24 Feb. 2025.

About the Author

Vermont-based food and environmental writer Rowan Jacobsen earned his undergraduate degree from the New College of Florida in Sarasota, and he earned a master's degree in fiction writing from the University of North Carolina in Greensboro. As a young boy he spent some time living in Florida, near an eastern estuary, and it was there at the age of twelve that he first developed a love of oysters. A foodie by both nature and nurture, he eventually began to write about food and cuisine, as well as about the relationship between the environment and the quality of the foods it produces. He is a regular contributor to a number of publications, including the *New York Times, Newsweek, Harper's, Saveur, Eating Well, Wondertime,* and *Art of Eating*. In addition, he is the author or coauthor of a number of food-related books, including A *Geography of Oysters: The Connoisseur's Guide to Oyster Eating in America,* in which he celebrates his love for the oyster and for which he won the prestigious James Beard Award. Other titles include his first book, *Chocolate Unwrapped: The Surprising Health Benefits of America's Favorite Passion, Fruitless Fall: The Collapse of the Honeybee and the Coming Agricultural Crisis, and The Living Shore: Rediscovering a Lost World*.

In *A Geography of Oysters*, Jacobsen sets out to share his obsession with this seafood delicacy. He traces his enthusiasm for them back to his childhood in Florida, describing the way he would harvest and eat raw wild oysters right off the beach in his youth--a method he does not recommend, due to health risks. He then sets out to educate the reader on the different types of oysters that are now available in North America, including information on how and where they are grown and the different characteristics that they possess. In preparation for writing the book, Jacobsen traveled to various oyster growers to gain an understanding of the different conditions that produced the numerous varieties of oysters now available. In an interview with James Wright for Seafood Business magazine, Jacobsen commented on how the love of oysters is part art and part science, noting: "It starts off being an art. This holds true for other foods, too. It's an art in that your initial appreciation comes from your senses and how they respond to the food. Once we begin to realize, 'I like this and not this,' we start wondering why, which leads to the science." John Burgess, writing for the Boston Globe Online, remarked that Jacobsen's effort is "a wide-ranging, thorough, breezily written guide to oysters as cuisine." In a review of *A Geography of Oysters* for *National Fisherman*, Kirk Moore praised the book, commenting that "Jacobsen writes brightly, ably handling America's oyster's heritage and the ingenious ways growers now adapt to local conditions."

Fruitless Fall is, in many ways, a more serious work than Jacobsen's guide to oysters. This 2008 book takes a look at the mysterious decline of the honeybee population and the wide-ranging effects this has on the environment, particularly in the production and harvesting of fruit. According to beekeeping experts, approximately a third of the entire worldwide populations of bees died in a single year. Bees, which do the work of pollinating plants in both wild and commercial settings, are necessary to help plants bear fruit. Therefore, this sudden disappearance of such a large part of the bee population will result in a drastic reduction in fruit crops all over the world. Numerous names have been assigned to the problem with the honeybee population, from colony collapse disorder (CCD) to stress accelerated decline, but the issue is the domino effect on the planet. In *Fruitless Fall*, Jacobsen explains what appears to be happening and the various hypotheses as to why.

Donna Seaman, in a review for *Booklist*, praised his approach, stating that "Jacobsen explains why with compelling lucidity, carefully documented facts, and a deep respect for the sophisticated and diligent honeybee." Irene Wanner, writing for the *Seattle Times*, stated that Jacobsen's "fascinating book is written for a general audience, introducing readers to honeybees' life cycles, [and] how hive intelligence works." A writer for *Publishers Weekly*, noting that Jacobsen has involved himself in this crisis to the point where he now keeps his own beehives, declared that "the author ... invests solid investigative journalism with a poet's voice to craft a fact-heavy book that soars." In a contribution to *Kirkus Reviews*, a writer noted that the book approaches the subject "from a well-informed 'green' perspective, in a breezy, humorous tone at odds with the ominous implications of his tale. For many readers, it may make the mystery of CCD easier to comprehend."

The Living Shore, published in 2009, features studies of an isolated group of oysters on Vancouver Island's western side, which scientists believe could provide a potential plan for cleaning up the world's oceans. Brian Kingzett was a scientist surveying the western coast of Canada in the early 1990s when he discovered Olympias oysters, or "Olys," a delicacy living among the common clams and mussels. A decade passed before Kingzett learned that the oysters were declining. He decided to return to the spot of his earlier sighting to see if the Olys he discovered were still surviving. Accompanied by scientists including Betsy Peadoby, executive director of the Puget Sound Restoration Fund, and Jacobsen, Kingzett hoped that, if the oysters have survived, they can shed light on how to help ocean life prosper.

The Living Shore recounts the group's travels up the coast and the story of Olys. Jacobsen details the oysters' crucial role in the ecosystem, creating protein-producing estuaries. He also explains the negative impact of the decline of these oysters. "An oyster, properly seen, can be a thing of beauty, and Jacobsen sees the shellfish in all of its exquisite glory, using it to show us how far from the days of abundance we've truly come," wrote Craig Welch in a review for *Seattle Times Online*. A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor called the book "lovely science writing, and a smart look into where the work of ecological restoration is headed."

In his next book, *American Terroir: Savoring the Flavors of Our Woods, Waters, and Fields,* Jacobsen investigates "the taste of place," which the French refer to as "terroir." A term mostly applied in the United States to wine cultivation, terroir is little understood in America. Jacobsen sets out to explain how terroir should be applied to all of America's agricultural bounty. "Jacobsen's *American Terroir* is a book that extols the concept of terroir, the specific complexities of edibles produced in a very specific place," wrote Lyza Danger Gardner on her Web log *Lyza*.

Focusing primarily on North America, the author examines specific regions and the delicious food that comes from them. He includes recipes for regional specialties and information on collecting specimens. The wide range of regional food sources discussed by Jacobsen include the best avocadoes grown in Mexico, Alaskan salmon, New England maple syrup, Minnesotan cheese, and Mesoamerican chocolate.

"Rowan Jacobsen." Gale Literature: Contemporary Authors, Gale, 2011. Gale Literature Resource Center, link.gale.com/apps/doc/H1000190566/LitRC?u=txshrpub100319&sid=bookmark-LitRC&xid=09496f19. Accessed 24 Feb. 2025.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Jacobsen explore the cultural significance of chocolate in different societies? What role does chocolate play in history, and how does it influence the relationships between people and the environment?
2. Jacobsen discusses the environmental and ethical concerns surround chocolate production. How does he present the challenges and solutions related to sustainability in the chocolate industry?
3. The book delves into the biology and science of cacao. How does the author intertwine scientific explanations with storytelling, and how does this deepen our understanding of chocolate beyond its flavor and enjoyment?
4. What does “wild” chocolate mean in the context of the book? How does the concept of “wildness” contrast with the mass production of chocolate we are familiar with today?
5. In the book, Jacobsen shares personal experiences and visits to cacao farms. How do these experiences shape the narrative and your perception of chocolate? How does the personal connection compare with the way chocolate is consumed globally?
6. How does globalization affect the cacao trade, and what are the implications of this for small farmers and their livelihoods? How does Jacobsen address the tension between artisanal and mass-produced chocolate?
7. Jacobsen provides a rich history of cacao and its cultural significance. How does the book illuminate the ways chocolate has shaped different cultures and civilizations? Were there any historical revelations that surprised you?
8. Jacobsen describes wild chocolate as having distinct flavors. How did his descriptions of flavor profiles impact your view of chocolate as more than just a sweet treat? Did you try any new chocolate after reading the book, or did it change your appreciation for the chocolate you eat?
9. How does Jacobsen challenge our perception of chocolate as either a common commodity or a luxurious indulgence? What are the economic and social implications of these differing views?
10. After reading the book, how do you think the future of chocolate will unfold? What trends or shifts do you foresee in the way chocolate is grown, produced, and consumed?
11. Did reading *Wild Chocolate* change the way you view chocolate or the chocolate industry? If so, how? Have you thought differently about where your chocolate comes from or its environmental and social impact?
12. How did you feel about Jacobsen’s writing style and structure in this book? Did you find the narrative style engaging or challenging? How did he blend scientific, historical, and personal storytelling?

Recipes

Solstice Drinking Chocolate

- 14 ounces heavy cream
- 5 ounces or two dark chocolate bars, 70% cacao or higher, preferably Solstice Bolivia
- Fleur de sel sea salt
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

In a medium bowl, whisk 4 ounces of heavy cream until whipped, but still loose. We don't want stiff peaks, but enough volume to hold cream together when we top our chocolate with it. Set aside.

Simmer a small pot of water. Set a metal or glass bowl over it, making sure there is air between the bottom of the bowl and the simmering water. Pour 10 ounces of cream into bowl and heat until it's warm enough to melt the chocolate. Add 5 ounces of chocolate and stir to melt. Once the chocolate is melted, use and immersion blender or whisk to combine. Whisk until your ganache is fully blended. Stir in vanilla, then add fleur de sel in small pinches, to taste.
Pour into small espresso cups, Mason jars, or other small glasses. Spoon whipped cream on top and serve immediately.

This is an easy recipe to add your own unique twist. Here are a few easy ways to make it your own:

- Steep the cream ahead of time with your favorite spices
- Add a cinnamon stir stick upon serving
- Add a dash of cayenne for a spicy kick
- Add booze. Any booze. I'm a personal fan of whiskey or Bailey's
- Mix equal parts drinking chocolate with coffee
- Top with marshmallows or whipped cream
- Substitute your favorite bitters for half of the vanilla extract

https://caputos.com/blog/chocolate-week-solstice-drinking-chocolate-recipe/

Recipes

Wasatch Blend Chocolate Tart

Tart Dough

- 8 tablespoons butter
- 1/3 cup sugar
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon Beehive Spiced Orange bitters
- 2 egg yolks
- 1 1/4 cups all-purpose flour

Mix all ingredients with a stand or hand mixer until there are no dry patches. Chill for at least 4 hours or overnight until firm. Preheat your oven to 350 degrees. Roll dough out to about 1/4 inch thickness or until there is an excess of about 3 inches in diameter to fit an 8-inch tart shell. Press dough into the shell and bake 20-25 minutes or until golden brown. Allow to cool before removing the tart ring from the shell.

Chocolate Ganache Filling

- 10 ounces heavy cream
- 7 ounces Solstice Wasatch Blend, or two dark chocolate bars, 70% cacao or higher
- Fleur de sel sea salt

Simmer a small pot of water. Set a metal or glass bowl over it, making sure there is air between the bottom of the bowl and the simmering water. Pour cream into bowl and heat until it's warm enough to melt the chocolate. Add chocolate and stir to melt. Once the chocolate is melted, use an immersion blender or whisk to combine. Whisk until your ganache is fully blended. Stir in fleur de sel in small pinches, to taste. Set aside to cool for about 15 minutes, then pour into the tart shell. Chill until ready to serve, but remove about 15-20 minutes before serving

Bitters Whipped Cream

- 10 ounces heavy cream
- 3 tablespoons confectioner's sugar
- 2 teaspoons Beehive Spiced Orange bitters

In a medium bowl, whisk heavy cream, confectioner's sugar, and bitters until whipped, but still loose. We don't want stiff peaks, but enough volume to hold cream together when we top our chocolate tart with it. Adjust sweetness and flavoring with bitters before serving.

https://caputos.com/blog/chocolate-week-adris-festive-wasatch-tart/

Enhance Your Book Club

- Rowan Jacobsen's OBSESSIONS: Wild Chocolate podcast series: https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/obsessions-wild-chocolate/id1650405584
- Atlas Obscura the Podcast: Wild Chocolate with Rowan Jacobsen. A journey into the Amazon rainforest to learn about a mythical chocolate. https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/podcast-wild-chocolate-with-rowan-jacobsen
- Heirloom Cacao Preservation Fund: Posts, videos, and educational resources about heirloom cacao and the quest to preserve it. https://www.hcpcacao.org
- Author interview from Wellington Square Bookshop: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GnrjQrucpys
- Author interview from #PodSaveChocolate: https://www.youtube.com/live/6-x0o02Ald0?si=3OGSFiQUbT2EPLtY

Read-Alikes

The Chocolate Maker's Wife by Karen Brooks

An illegitimate nobleman's daughter is rescued from abuse and drudgery by a chocolate proprietor in 17th-century London, where her high-society popularity is unknowingly threatened by her employer's secret past. By the author of The Locksmith's Daughter.

Chocolat: A Novel by Joanne Harris

A timeless novel of the small French village of Lansquenet's awakening to joy and sensuality tells the story of how bewitching newcomer Vianne Rocher and her chocolate shop arrive and begin to play havoc with everyone's Lenten vows.

Like Water for Chocolate by Laura Esquivel

Despite the fact that she has fallen in love with a young man, Tita, the youngest of three daughters born to a tyrannical rancher, must obey tradition and remain single and at home to care for her mother.

The Loveliest Chocolate Shop in Paris by Jenny Colgan

After a fateful accident at the chocolate factory where she works, Anna Trent is given the opportunity to work for an elite Parisian chocolate shop, where she falls in love with the city and awakens to new dimensions in her life.

Making Chocolate: From Bean to Bar to S'more by Todd Masonis

Four craft chocolate makers describe how to make your own chocolate through the "quick-start" and "deep-dive" methods and discuss the sourcing, fermenting, drying and roasting of the cacao beans and how to incorporate your homemade craft chocolate into artisan treats.

Chocolate Wars: the 150-Year Rivalry Between the World's Greatest Chocolate Makers by Deborah Cadbury

A descendant of the Cadbury family reveals the history of the chocolate companies' decades-old competition to make the sweetest indulgence and explores the bittersweet rivalries between the families behind Lindt, Hershey, Mars, Cadbury, Nestlé and more.

The Chocolate Tree: A Natural History of Cacao by Allen Young

Traces the history of chocolate, describes how plantations cultivate and harvest cacao trees, and describes the tree's ecological niche

Chocolate: Sweet Science and Dark Secrets of the World's Favorite Treat by Kay Frydenborg

Chocolate hits all the right sweet--and bitter--notes: cutting-edge genetic science whisked in with a strong social conscience, history, and culture yield one thought-provoking look into one of the world's most popular foods. Readers who savored Chew on This and Food, Inc. and lovers of chocolate will relish this fascinating read.