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BY GRANT ACHATZ

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SANDER WOLF

President, Fine
Chocolate Industry
Association
Supporting the Craft

on

late



The Fine Chocolate Industry Association is the premier organization in the United States for chocolate producers, makers, suppliers, retailers, chefs, teachers and enthusiasts of fine chocolate. We spoke to FCIA's president Sander Wolf about the association's history and plans for the future, and how he became involved.



How did you get started with FCIA?

I started getting into chocolate around 2005, 2006. And there were a couple of organizations that started to develop, because people realized they needed to connect with each other. So there was the Craft Chocolate Makers of America; FCIA had kind of started. That was where I started meeting people. At that point there were five people in the U.S. doing bean-to-bar chocolate and when you had three of them in the room with you at a meeting, I thought, maybe this organization means something. It grew and became the dominant organization for craft chocolate. So I joined the board during Covid. I was on the events and education committee. The organization was going through some bad times. Dahlia [Graham] from Fruition was working her heart out to bring it back. She had to step away to concentrate on Fruition, so I went from Vice President to President.

We're a non-profit organization devoted to small to medium-sized chocolate businesses

and we support those businesses with education, networking, discounts to events and advocacy. The idea is to make better chocolate.

We hear about good and bad themes that have been associated with chocolate such as fair trade, traceability, best practices and child labor. How can a purchaser be assured that those themes are being properly addressed when they purchase?

That's a tough one. You can't always go and meet the farmer every time you eat a chocolate bar. You have to trust the next level above. If I'm buying a chocolate bar, I want to trust the company that made it and I hope they're trusting their supplier of beans and I'm hoping the supplier of beans trusts the farm. It's really about finding companies where you know those things are aligned.

Is the industry going in the right direction?

I think we are. Over the last ten years there has been a kind of fetishization of food, so people want to know more about it and treat it as more than nourishment. They want to know the producer, where things came from. You see it with craft beer, with chocolate and even with animals. There was that snout-to-tail movement where you want to use all parts of the animal, so I think that's happening in a lot of industries. I think that's a good thing, because people are more informed and they're trying to do the right thing more often. You see that in chocolate. I saw a presentation a couple of months ago that talked about the wrapping on a chocolate bar. If one side has foil and one has paper, which bin do you put it in to recycle? People are paying attention to that.

What's in an FCIA membership for manufacturers, shop owners and chocolate lovers?

We're at about 150 companies right now. There are multiple people per company. They're mostly small and mid-sized companies. We have a lot of chocolatiers running shops. Every part of the industry is represented. We have bean-to-bar chocolate makers, farmers, shop owners, people who make equipment, people who run events and do tastings.

What do we offer? One is they get to be among friends and they can talk through the issues they're having with people who know what they're going through. We present education to them that focuses on stuff they're working on. We try to provide discounts for them. We have one with a shipping company, Worldwide Express, that members can use. We just did a webinar with a company called Fishbowl that does inventory management and has a discount for members. We'll have a discount for members who attend festivals that highlight areas of interest. We've been able to arrange speaking slots for members at events, with tastings of

members' chocolates when they have trouble doing it on their own. If they can't be there to man a table all weekend, we can have them display some of their chocolate at a table run by FCIA. By combining the strengths of our organization, we're able to do some things they can't do on their own.

How often do you have Webinars?

We try to do at least one a month that's a standard networking meeting. Lately it's been talking about the most recent festival and what we learned from that. We've been doing one for potential new members so they can ask questions and find out about us. We've been doing classes in two main categories. We do a lot of small-business topic classes. We did one about goal setting, how to make sure you're not staying in one place. We did one about how to look at your numbers of sales price; retail vs. wholesale. We've done different chocolate topics from what the chocolate scene is like in France to how post-harvest techniques affect flavor. It's 50-50, business and technique.



Tell me about the chocolate shows people can attend domestically and internationally.

I founded the Dallas Chocolate Festival. I ran that for 15 years. I sold it a few years ago. There are just so many more regional events. This past month we went to Chocopa In Amsterdam, saw a lot of regional companies we don't usually see. Then Salon du Chocolat in New York. There's the Southwest Coffee and Chocolate Festival [each Spring in Albuquerque]. There's a company doing festivals on the East Coast. They do the DMV Festival for Washington D.C., Virginia and Maryland. There are more popping up every day. I think it's awesome. I did presentations in Amsterdam and New York and at both of those I asked the question how many people out there were going to their first chocolate festival. In both places most of the hands went up. People want to learn about fine chocolate. They all come in overwhelmed. They expect a bon bon and a bar and they see there's a whole industry with beans from different places that taste different from other beans. I think that's cool.

The industry is facing many challenges -- supply chain, climate, prices, tariffs, the war -- It's not just one gut punch. How are people dealing with that?

That's true. It's weird because things are getting easier at the same time they're getting harder. Sourcing is so much better. There are so many places to buy beans. There's so much more education, more places interested in selling fine chocolate. At the same time, cacao prices have been extremely volatile in the past few years, especially. Happily, the prices have come down a bit. Hopefully it's in the

range where it's still sustainable for makers and farmers. You don't want it to be too low, because you want people to be paid for their efforts. You also want people to be able to purchase it when inflation is rising. I think Dubai chocolate came in at just the right time. It came in when cacao prices were soaring and you had a product that had less actual chocolate in it, but it still had a big buzz and a huge perceived value, so chocolatiers could work off that buzz and fill in some of their sales from price increases of raw cacao.



Will we see more infusions or products with a smaller percentage of cacao?

I've seen a couple of different brands. I think Dubai will stick around. I think it'll be like when you go to a shop you expect to see a caramel and a ganache. I think people will expect some kind of pistachio filling that's crunchy, and it'll just become a thing. That's fine. If you hit on something people like, people want to keep doing it. You did see companies trying to make synthetic cacao with mushrooms or whatever just because they figured it would be cheaper for them. I think you'll see those start to fade away now that the price has become more reasonable. As for inclusions, I think that trend is somewhat separate. I see a lot of manufacturing moving towards the place of origin and I see people differentiating their product by also including some local flavors in there. If it's from Brazil, you might have Brazilian spices in it. If it's from Ecuador, you might have a kind of nut in it. Or dried fruits. I was talking to a manufacturer in upstate New York and I asked, kind of as a joke, what local flavors he was incorporating into his chocolate and he had a good answer. He said, "we get a lot of fresh raspberries. I've been doing a cool bar with freeze dried fresh raspberries."



FCIA board members Emily Meza-Wilson (Mindo Chocolate), Nate Saal (CocoTerra), Wolf and Keith Ayoob (Cut to the Chase Nutrition)

What else is new in the industry?

I've seen a push towards making things at origin, maybe not a full bar with inclusions made in the fields, but some value added. Instead of people selling just raw dried beans, maybe they're selling liquor or cocoa butter or better fermentation because there's a better feedback loop. That information is out there and there's no reason farmers should leave money on the table by just shipping beans by themselves.

Can you come up with an underappreciated place for cacao beans?

Just recently at Chocoa, I saw bean-to-bar associations being created. There was one for Europe, one for England, one from France, one for Spain, one for Japan that was starting to buy beans together in a kind of co-op. It's not just America and Belgium, for example. There are more finished chocolate bars from different parts of the world for sale around the world. You see more beans from Asia, India, Indonesia, Vietnam. Countries around there are improving quality and gaining recognition.

What would you say to people just starting a chocolate business?

I see a lot of people doing chocolate tastings. We used to call it curating. There's a company called Chocolate Explorers and they send out a monthly box of chocolate. They do a meet-the-maker webinar. That way, you find out where the gaps are and where the opportunities are.

I have a marketing question: Do we position chocolate the right way, given how luxurious it actually is?

I just went to a presentation about that by Estelle Tracy from 37 Chocolates. You approach the chocolate geek one way, an enthusiast another way, people with dietary restrictions another way. A lot of it is selling the experience. Imagine tasting this chocolate with your friends and a glass of wine as opposed to saying this bar is 70% and it's from Brazil. A geek responds to one; a consumer responds to another.

How do you go from enthusiast to expert?

Chocolate doesn't have many universally recognized standards compared to coffee and wine. There isn't a W3 standard set of qualifications that's universally recognized as with sommeliers. We don't have a standardized tasting wheel or a really good definition of what bitter means. There are options. Ecole Chocolat has pretty good classes. The IICCT [International Institute of Chocolate & Cacao Tasting] with Martin Christy [founder and editor of the chocolate website Seventy%] and Maricel Persilla [chocolate historian and author] do. They have classes on tastings and certifications. Really the way to do it is to taste a lot of stuff and talk to other people who are tasting a lot of stuff. Once you start making chocolate from the beans or you start working in the pastry department of a restaurant or a school, you start learning.

Tell me about the FCIA Awards.

FCIA Awards have been around for about 15 years. The organization will celebrate its 20th anniversary next year. They've been giving different awards in different contexts. This year, we broke that down to three named awards: one for sustainability named for Mott Green, an award for Eric Case about service to the industry and an award for Ed Seguire for furthering education and tasting and overall excellence to the industry. So not just an award for best chocolate bar.

What's missing from the industry?

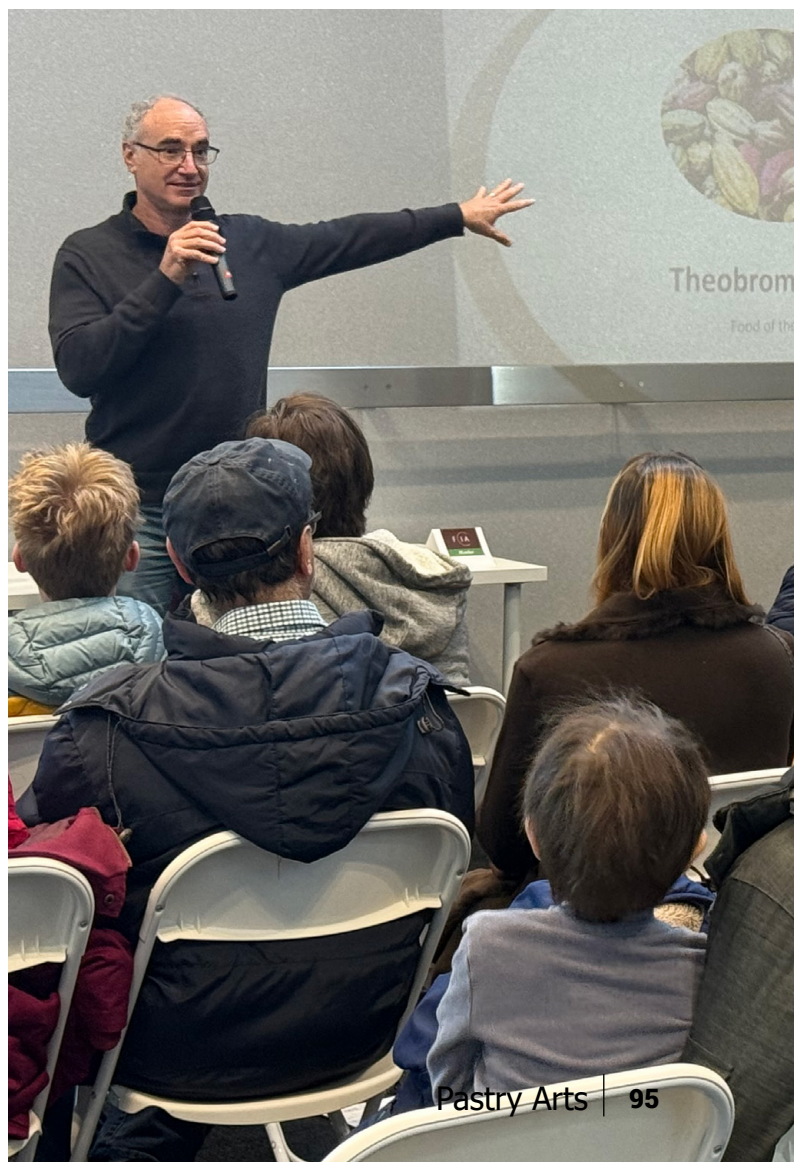
Probably marketing itself. It's a lot of work to do something with chocolate, to open up a store and then to promote yourself and teach people to appreciate what you're doing when they don't have context for it. I don't think we do that enough as an industry. Sometimes we get a little too particular about *did this*

chocolate follow all the rules? Is it mass market? Is it fine chocolate? Did you bite the chocolate when you put it in your mouth or did you let it melt on the back of your tongue? Sometimes you can be too precious about that kind of thing. But opening it up and marketing it and giving people a comfortable entry point into it is something we need to spend more time on.

You talk about it as a luxury and it certainly is. There's a really long process that goes into it, but yet I could buy the best chocolate bar in the world and it might be 20 bucks. I can afford that. Maybe not every day, but I can afford that for a special occasion or, you know, because today's a Tuesday.

Photos Courtesy of FCIA

FCIA Vice President Nate Saal addresses the crowd.

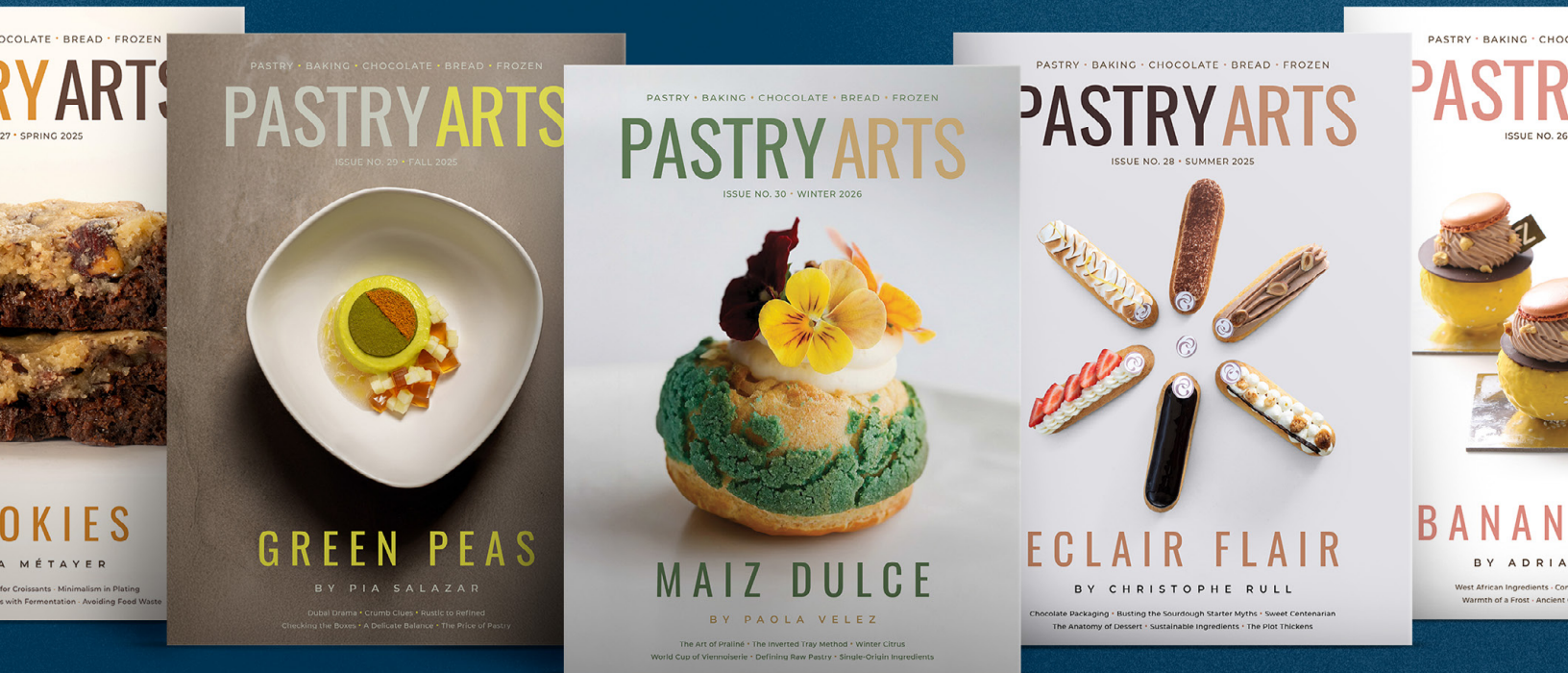


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