



# PURPURA SANTIA

*IN SOUTHERN INDIA,  
CRAFT CHOCOLATE  
MAKERS ARE HITTING  
THE SWEET SPOT BY  
COMBINING LOCALLY  
HARVESTED CACAO WITH  
INDIGENOUS FLAVORS.  
SHOBA NARAYAN  
GOES TO THE SOURCE  
FOR A TASTE.*

**THE RIPE STUFF**  
Freshly harvested  
cacao pods at  
Manam Chocolate's  
fermentery in  
Andhra Pradesh.

# AN HOUR OUTSIDE VIJAYAWADA,

in the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, lies the delta of the Godavari River. Small towns with musical names — Jalipudi, Eluru, Gangu — dot this fertile landscape, ringed by farmland so intensely green they say it cools the eyes. There are lush paddies and sugarcane fields, thick stands of banana and coconut trees. And flourishing alongside them is a newer crop: cacao.

“After eating our chocolate, you will never touch a Lindt or Godiva again,” says Chaitanya Muppala with the bravado of a startup founder, which he is. Tall and loose-limbed, the thirty-something Hyderabad-based entrepreneur is the man behind Manam Chocolate, a new craft chocolate brand that aims to overturn the poor reputation of Indian cacao.

On this balmy March morning, he is sitting under a ficus tree chatting with his cacao farmers over milky ginger chai. He inquires after their families, they talk shop about crops, he tells a young second-generation farmer to ride shotgun with him and learn about the world of fine-flavor cacao.

Muppala says that when he first started working with the farmers of the West Godavari district 15 years ago, he inherited an “orgy of varieties.” The farmers were intercropping cacao with coconut, areca nut, and pepper. The focus was to increase the yield to sell to mass-market companies like Cadbury and Nestle. So there were accidental hybrids, haphazard planting, and zero respect for terroir and the complex flavors that craft chocolate required.

“It took a long time to convince them to join the craft chain rather than the mass-market bandwagon,” Muppala recalls. Today, Manam gets its cacao from about 150 farmers, who together cultivate some 1,200 hectares. Manam’s single-estate chocolate bars bear a few of their names, such as Tablet No. 3, made of 68 percent dark chocolate from beans grown on the farm of one G.V.S. Prasad in the village of Tadikalapudi. Traceability and provenance are key to the company’s mission.

“We want to make craft chocolate, but we don’t want to be elitist,” explains Muppala, who has found many ways to showcase the brand’s collaborative relationship with its suppliers, starting with its name: *manam* means “us” in Telugu. Last year, when he inaugurated his shiny new workshop, lab, and retail space in Hyderabad’s affluent Banjara Hills neighborhood, he invited farmers to show up on their tractors, cut a ribbon, and ceremoniously enter the store. A two hours later, the police showed up because the lines outside had become unmanageable. “Fine-flavor cacao and craft chocolate is still quite new in India,” says Muppala with a wry smile. An understatement.

Later, he brings me to Manam’s cacao “fermentery” in nearby Tadikalapudi. Once a tobacco warehouse, the facility has been retrofitted to process cacao. Outside, some 30 women in a

rainbow of sarees sit in a group breaking open cacao pods and removing the pulp by hand. They chat, sing, and laugh among themselves. Inside, wooden crates lined with banana leaves contain fermenting cacao pulp. Each crate and drying rack has codes identifying the name of the farm, farmer, yields, and farming practices. “The data enables us to know exactly where our cacao comes from,” Muppala says. Such obsessive tracking underscores Muppala’s quest for an Indian cacao varietal that can hold its own against the best in the world.

ACCORDING TO NITIN CHORDIA, India’s first certified chocolate taster and founder of sustainable chocolate band Kocoatrait, “So far India has had the unfortunate reputation of our cacao beans being not good enough.” It is this impression that South India’s passionate craft chocolate makers want to change.

The new highway from Bengaluru (where I live) to Mysuru gets you to Naviluna Artisan Chocolate in just over an hour. When founder David Belo moved here from London in 2012, it used to take three hours. Belo originally came to this former royal city in southern Karnataka on a break from his life in London working in restaurants. When a friend brought some cacao beans from Gokarna on the Karnatakan coast, he had the glimmering of an idea — and never left. Today, Naviluna is housed in a charming heritage bungalow with stained-glass windows, a café, and a bright yellow house in the back where the chocolate is made. Choosing Mysuru was a smart move, as it grants access to quality ingredients from farmers who come into the city from the Konkan Coast, neighboring Bandipur Forest, and the foothills of the Western Ghats. The slow-paced tenor of the town also allows for an insouciance that’s distinct from the precision that lies at the heart of Western-style chocolate making.

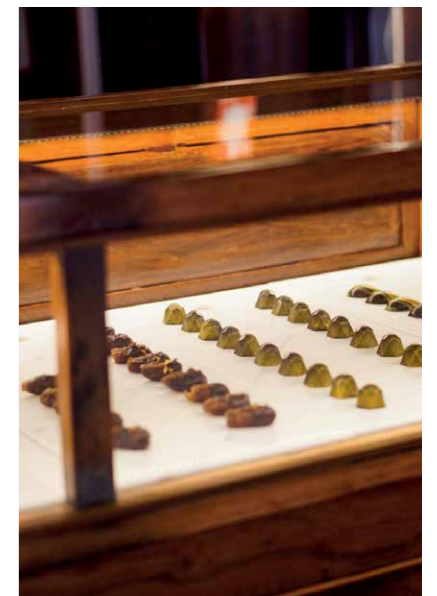
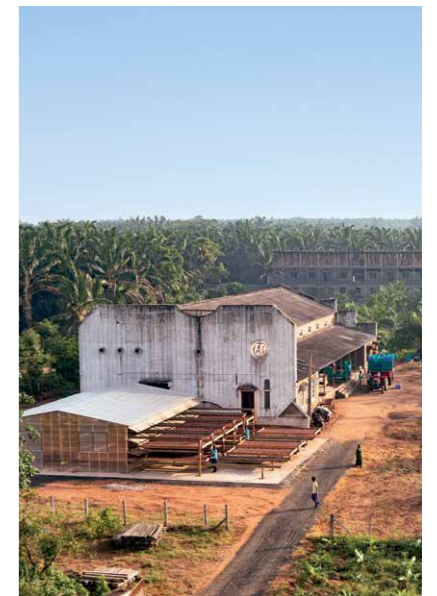
Naviluna (the name means “peacock” in Kannada) embraces the bird’s flamboyance, adding ingredients such as Gondhoraj lime, longum pepper, purple jamuns, as well as the famous local Nanjangud banana (now under threat from disease) in its chocolates. “We focus on a terroir-centric approach to chocolate making with an aim of showcasing the unique flavor profile of Indian cacao,” Belo tells me. And what is that profile?

Two years ago, in November 2022, I attended the first Indian Cacao and Craft Chocolate Festival in Bengaluru. Even though I ate chocolates, I had no idea what craft chocolate was and found the word “artisanal” overused. At Bangalore International Centre where the festival happened, a crowd of us sampled chocolate from 30 brands. The two co-founders, a Romanian chocolate consultant named Patricia Cosma and Mumbai-based chocolatier Ketaki Churi, talked about what made Indian cacao special, which all boiled down to the biodiverse conditions in which it grows.

“India has a lot of hybrid cacao varieties growing in different soil, altitudes, and weather conditions,” Cosma said. “All of this results in amazingly diverse flavors, from fruity — like bananas and red berries — to earthy, floral, and spicy.”

I came out carrying nearly 30 bars of chocolate from different makers. Some had a depth of taste that I had never encountered in the duty-free chocolate

**BEAN TO BONBON**  
Opposite, clockwise from top left: Workers at Manam Chocolate’s cacao “fermentery” in Andhra Pradesh removing the pulp and seeds from cacao pods; a bird’s-eye view of the factory; bonbons at Naviluna’s bean-to-bar chocolate atelier and tasting room in Mysuru; grading cacao seeds; a corner of the 19th-century bungalow that now serves as Naviluna’s headquarters; an open cacao pod; chocolate-making at Naviluna.



OPPOSITE: COURTESY OF NAVILUNA (3); ALL OTHERS (INCLUDING PREVIOUS SPREAD) HASHIM BADANI



FROM TOP: DANIEL D'SOUZA; COURTESY OF MASON & CO (2); OPPOSITE: HASHIM BADANI

that I usually buy. Some had familiar hints of cardamom or chili. Some tasted weird and funky. Some single-origin dark chocolate was too intense. As Muppala told me, “We all grew up eating Dairy Milk, so our palates have to adjust.”

The festival has continued across different locations in India and will return to Bengaluru this November. Of the lot I tasted, a handful of brands are taking the craft to the next level. Manam and Naviluna, of course, but also Soklet, Bon Fiction, Paul And Mike, Mason & Co, and Kocoatrait. It is a tight-knit universe where everyone knows each other.

Each of these brands follows largely the same formula. They source cacao beans from local farmers and use an *idli* grinder — very common in Indian kitchens — to grind the roasted beans before conching the chocolate mixture and pouring it into molds. The couverture — a coating chocolate that contains a higher percentage of cocoa butter — is used to make truffles, bonbons, and the like. This is where they get to play. At Manam’s show kitchen in Hyderabad, I watch petite chef Ruby Islam bend over a tray of chocolate truffles, imbuing them with ingredients like curry leaves and coconut, mint and matcha. “Chocolate is a forgiving ingredient, so you can take more risks than in a traditional pastry recipe,” she says. On weekends, when she teaches schoolchildren how to make chocolate, her kitchen reverberates with their laughs and giggles.

THE BEST PART OF A VISIT to Mason & Co chocolate in Auroville, just up the road from the onetime French colony of Pondicherry, is seeing the smiling faces of the people who run the place — and they are all women. This too is a happy by-product of craft chocolate. In India, where female participation in the workforce is abysmal, the sector allows for women to participate at every stage, from farming to sorting to creating. Nearly 20 ladies run every aspect of the chocolate making at Mason & Co. “Our lives have been transformed,” one tells me on my most recent visit.

The same happens at Soklet, a well-respected brand from the Anamalai Hills near Coimbatore, where I was born. “We were already growing cacao but didn’t want to be one among the thousand farmers who sell to mass-market chocolate brands,” says Harish Kumar, who started the company with his brother-in-law. Made with cacao from the family’s plantation in Pollachi, Soklet retails in Europe and is one of only a few Indian brands featured on the London-based craft chocolate platform Cocoa Runners. Here, too, women of the family are heavily involved in making and marketing chocolate, sharing an easy rapport with the farmers who have lived in the region for generations.

Even though each of South India’s craft chocolate brands use similar processes, they have their own stamp of individuality. Kocoatrait brands itself as sustainable; Mason & Co stresses its female workforce and vegan credentials; Naviluna focuses on terroir, and Soklet on its tree-to-bar chain; Manam wants to be the best. All of them have an uphill battle not just because craft chocolate is new in India but also because cacao prices have skyrocketed in the last several months. “It’s going to weed out a lot of brands that are not here to stay,” says Kumar.

Chocolate is both a food and an emotion. In India, all this gets amplified by the organized chaos of the landscape, the farmers, and the personal quirks of the makers. It may not create the best craft chocolate in the world, but it can aspire to be the most memorable, with strange and interesting ingredients that remind you of the home you left, the love you lost, or the idea whose time has come. ☪

## HIT THE SWEET SPOTS IN SOUTH INDIA

**Manam Chocolate**  
Embrace your inner Willy Wonka at Manam’s sleek new flagship store and chocolate-making facility in Hyderabad, where you can watch chocolatiers in action and sip hot chocolate at the on-site café ([manamchocolate.com](http://manamchocolate.com)).

**Naviluna Artisan Chocolate**  
Buy from the source at this brand’s chocolate factory and atmospheric café on Ramavilas Road in Mysuru ([naviluna.in](http://naviluna.in)).

**Mason & Co**  
Private tours (minimum six people) can be arranged at the Mason & Co chocolate factory in Tamil Nadu’s Auroville, on the south-east coast of India ([masonchocolate.com](http://masonchocolate.com)).



**RAISING THE BAR**  
From top: Head chef Ruby Islam at work in Manam’s flagship store and factory in Hyderabad; a bar of chocolate at Mason & Co; outside the same brand’s Auroville factory. *Opposite:* Harvesting time at a cacao farm in West Godavari.

