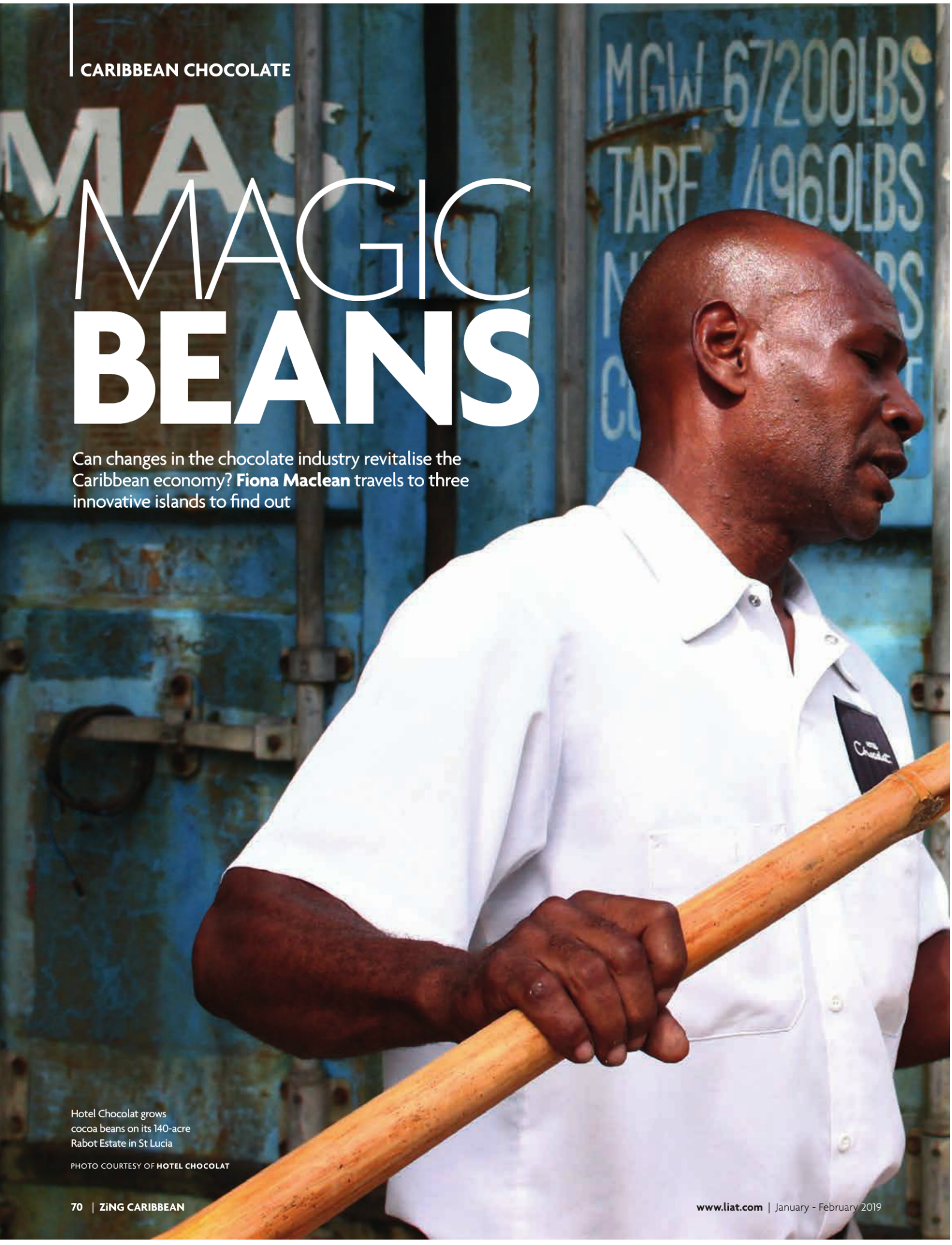
MAGIC BEANS

Can changes in the chocolate industry revitalise the Caribbean economy? **Fiona Maclean** travels to three innovative islands to find out



Hotel Chocolat grows cocoa beans on its 140-acre Rabot Estate in St Lucia

PHOTO COURTESY OF **HOTEL CHOCOLAT**



The Caribbean has always had a special relationship with chocolate. Cacao beans were cultivated, consumed and even used as currency in Central America and the Yucatán Peninsula for centuries before the arrival of Spanish Conquistadores in the 16th century. Soon after they encountered cacao, the Spanish introduced it to the Caribbean, where it flourished in the tropical climate. By the mid-17th century, chocolate was a popular drink in Europe – and as the Spanish controlled trade with Latin America, other European countries looked to the West Indies to obtain cacao.

Over the years, though, the Caribbean cacao industry declined, hit by the growth in plantations elsewhere and the evolution of mass production chocolate. Today, though, an increasingly artisanal approach and the introduction of exciting new ideas and flavours is sparking a revival in the fortunes of Caribbean chocolate producers. ››

SPICE ISLE SWEETNESS

In Grenada, it was the vision of an American, Mott Green, that reignited the chocolate industry. When Green visited the island he camped in a hut near the village of Hermitage, seeking peace. He was befriended by local farmer and cacao grower Edmond Brown, who encouraged him to move up into the plantation. While living there, Green was inspired to help his farmer friends by starting a chocolate factory.

The Grenada Chocolate Company was formed in 1999, when Mott, Brown and another Grenadian, Doug Browne, set up an Organic Cocoa Farmers' and Chocolate-Makers' Cooperative. After a couple of weeks training in the USA they returned to Grenada to source the machinery and put together the factory.

"It wasn't an easy journey at all," admits Brown, "but we now have 22 workers in the factory plus the farmers – we mustn't forget the farmers, because without them we can't make chocolate."

Two decades later, the cooperative comprises organic cacao (here mostly called cocoa) farms spanning over 200 acres, which don't use chemical pesticides, herbicides or fertilisers. Farmers are paid around 65% more for their beans than the local market price, and the cooperative helps with the management of the land, planting, growing and harvesting. The chocolate produced by the Grenada Chocolate Company is exported to Europe and the USA as well as sold locally.

The business was a game-changer: it proved that it was possible to manufacture chocolate on the island, while also improving the welfare of the farmers and workers. It inspired others to set up their own artisan chocolate companies. Now there are five bean-to-bar chocolate manufacturers on Grenada, each with its own approach.

Kim and Lylette Russell took over Crayfish Bay Estate after it was destroyed by Hurricane Ivan in 2004. The 15-acre estate, a cocoa plantation as long ago as the 18th century, now operates a unique land-management system.

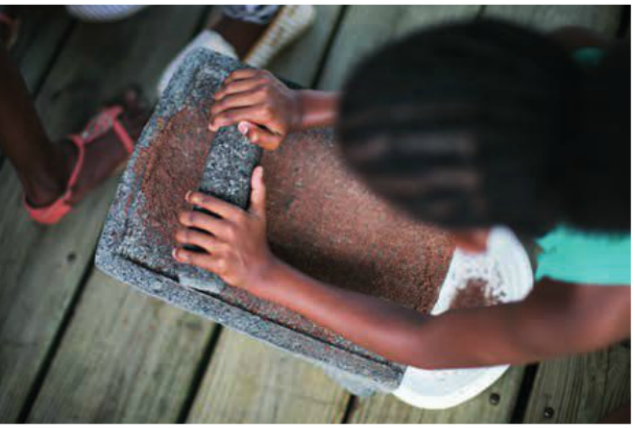
"I see myself as the custodian of this land, responsible for the grass, the plants and the people," says Kim. I've given absolute control of the land to the local people. They can plant whatever they like. When they farm cocoa, I buy it – and I pay double what they get down the road."

Kim, originally from England, arrived in Grenada 27 years ago; Lylette was born and raised in Guyana. They learned about cocoa production from local farmers, and Kim built almost all the necessary machinery himself from scrap and recycled material. His aim is to create a set-up that can be copied by others with minimal investment.

Belmont Estate, just along the road from Crayfish Bay, is another organic farm offering tree-to-bar chocolate. It was founded in the 16th century as a coffee and sugar plantation; cocoa and nutmeg were introduced in the 19th century. Belmont Estate started by partnering with Grenada Chocolate Company but has now set up its own chocolate factory, plus a museum and restaurant.



TRUE BLUE BAY RESORT GRENADA



TRUE BLUE BAY RESORT GRENADA

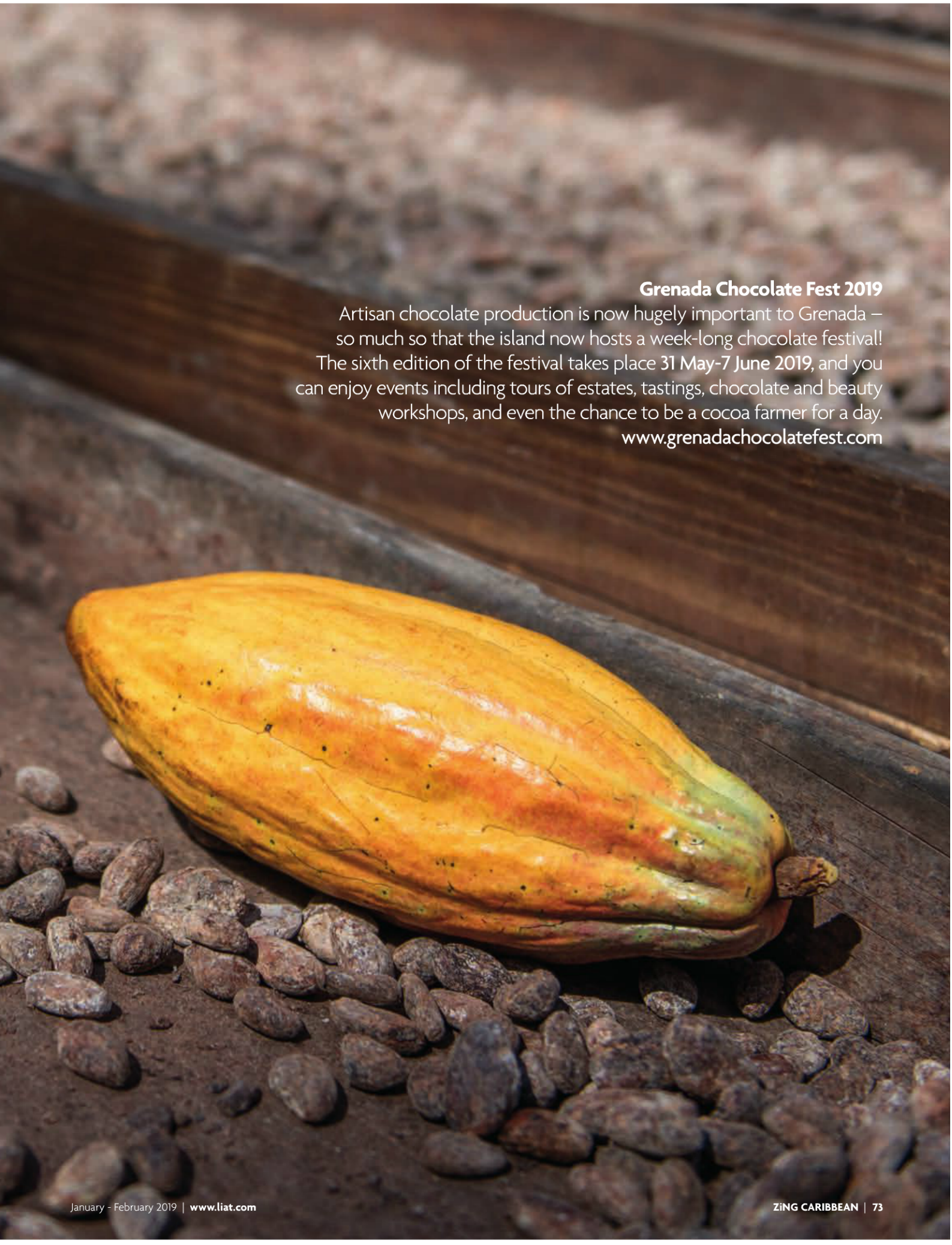
TRINI TRANSFORMATION

In Trinidad, efforts to build a chocolate industry are an attempt to offset dwindling revenues from oil and gas. Ashley Parasram, director of the Trinidad & Tobago Fine Cocoa Company, has worked for over 20 years on environmental and sustainability projects. Born in Trinidad & Tobago, he moved to the UK as a young boy, but a chance meeting led him to investigate the cocoa industry on his home island. Eventually he launched TTFCC.

Before the establishment of TTFCC, Trinidad's beans were exported and blended into mass-produced chocolate products. Yet more than 100 distinct varieties of Trinitario cacao are cultivated here, creating exciting possibilities for excellent single-estate chocolate.

"We are very excited about raising the profile of Trinitario cocoa, which is unique to the island," says Ashley. "The varieties of Trinitario are complex in flavour, similar to wine and whisky. Our aim is to educate the consumer on what fine cocoa means, and how we can enjoy chocolate and cocoa products in an exciting and engaging way that helps farmers produce sustainably."

THIS PHOTO: **HOTEL CHOCOLAT**



Grenada Chocolate Fest 2019

Artisan chocolate production is now hugely important to Grenada – so much so that the island now hosts a week-long chocolate festival! The sixth edition of the festival takes place **31 May-7 June 2019**, and you can enjoy events including tours of estates, tastings, chocolate and beauty workshops, and even the chance to be a cocoa farmer for a day.
www.grenadachocolatefest.com



PHOTO COURTESY OF **HOTEL CHOCOLAT**

TTFCC works with old estates such as Ortinola, and now produces its own single-estate chocolate instead of exporting beans for blending. It also runs tours and experiences in which visitors can make chocolate for themselves.

At the La Reunion Estate, the cocoa processing factory is state-of-the-art, using the latest bean-to-bar technology from Brazil to produce up to 100 tonnes of cocoa products each year. TTFCC partners with farmers and the processing facility to ensure quality and to fine-tune the production.

A key benefit is the ability to deliver a premium product with higher margins for the farmers, making cocoa farming economically viable. A farmer for over 40 years, 83-year-old Sebastian Thompson has 10 acres in the traditional cocoa-growing lands near Arima, all planted with Trinitario. He is paid around US$40 per kilogram by TTFCC – nearly double the US$23 rate at market – and can afford to pay workers to help him.

But, beyond pure financial considerations, there's an increasing pride in this artisan product. "Trinidad cocoa has a very good flavour, a special flavour of its own," says Sebastian. Unlike previous generations of cocoa farmers, Sebastian gets to taste and appreciate his own chocolate in bar form. "What the farmers really need is to get the people who are using cocoa to come closer, then cocoa farming will come back," he adds.

Thanks to a revival of interest in growing cocoa, all six of Sebastian's children plan to go into farming. "Now the government has no choice but to bring back agriculture," he says. "Oil will fail, everything will fail, but the land will not."

Such is the success of TTFCC that its chocolate is sold through Harrods in the UK as a co-branded product – the first time in 184 years that the famous department store has done this.

BED TO BAR

In St Lucia, the resurgence of the cocoa industry is closely linked with some of the island's most luxurious hotels.

Boucan, the boutique property of the Hotel Chocolat group, sits at the heart of the magnificent 140-acre Rabot Estate. Perched 300m above sea level, near Soufrière, its rich volcanic soil and rainforest water are perfect for cocoa production. Over the past decade or so Hotel Chocolat, which has owned the Rabot Estate since April 2006, has developed the hotel and the plantation. Angus Thirwell, CEO of Hotel Chocolat, says the concept is simple: to grow its own cocoa and create a direct connection with the origin of the product. Visitors to the hotel, both resident and non-resident, have the chance to tour the cocoa plantation, learn more about the production methods, dine on a chocolate-themed menu and even have a try at making their own chocolate.

Planet Chocolat is a world first – taking beans from roots to wrapper on a working cocoa plantation. Due to open early 2019, the innovative six-acre site will include a cocoa food market, chocolate factory and tree-to-bar experience in a site not far from the Sulphur Springs at Soufrière. Planet Chocolat will be open to all, drawing in local residents, cruise-ship guests and tourists staying elsewhere on the island – all of them eager to dive into a multi-sensory chocolate experience.

The finest chocolate produced by Hotel Chocolat is a 'single côte' from its own estate. Just like a Grand Cru champagne, Rabot Estate Marcial 70% dark chocolate comes from just one small plot of land planted with a mix of old and and new Trinitario trees. There's a range of single-estate chocolate from the Rabot Estate, too.

To satisfy demand for the chocolate of St Lucia, today Hotel Chocolat works with more than 200 farmers on the island as part of the Engaged Ethics Cocoa Programme. It not only buys every bean the farmers produce but also provides technical support and subsidised Trinitario cocoa seedlings. It is a success story for the island in terms of both tourism and agriculture. As Angus says: "A cocoa renaissance in St Lucia means 200 farmers supported ethically and a place of total chocolate immersion for visitors."

A few miles away, at Jade Mountain and Anse Chastanet, there's another initiative, driven by the desire of owner Nick Troubetzkoy and consulting chef Allen Susser to serve as much produce from



MADELINE WILD/TRINIDAD & TOBAGO FINE COCOA COMPANY



EMERALD ESTATE



ANDY BARNHAM

their own estate as possible. Responsibly growing and producing Emerald Estate Chocolate on-site is just one of the resort's sustainability initiatives.

In the late 1990s, when chef Allen discovered that there were more than 1,500 cocoa trees on the estate, he suggested that they should start to make chocolate. At that time, no one in St Lucia did much more with cocoa than make traditional cocoa tea, so this was a revelation. Cocoa production on the estate was overhauled, and the land was also redeveloped to produce a wide variety of vegetables, fruits and herbs used in the hotel kitchens. The estate's beans are handpicked, fermented and sun-dried, and farmers are involved in production to help ensure that the quality is the highest possible.

Chef Allen believes the results are something very special: "I established our Emerald Estate Chocolate with the passion of a chef, to capture the original flavour that Mother Nature intended. This set me on the course of discovery from cocoa tree to bean to bar, engaging in each delicious step of chocolate alchemy."

Unlike some of the other producers, the chocolate produced by the Emerald Estate is, for the most part, not exported but is destined to be used in the hotels' own restaurants or sold to guests. It also has a wider impact, inspiring local independent chocolate-makers to produce chocolate from St Lucia for the tourist market, offering farmers an opportunity to earn more for their beans and demonstrating a route forward for the Ministry of Agriculture to help the cocoa farming community in the future.

A TASTY FUTURE

Though the starting point for each island is unique, the results are much the same. This story is about Caribbean islands taking control of the production of chocolate from bean to bar, to improve the lot of local people. And thanks to a raw ingredient as fine as the Trinitario bean, that becomes possible. The growth of bean-to-bar production on Grenada, Trinidad and St Lucia helps ensure that farmers earn more for their cocoa, so making planting the crop worthwhile. It's also inspired the evolution of new 'chocolate tourism', with more opportunities for local people to run tours, tasting sessions and bean-to-bar experiences. There's a growing realisation that the Caribbean has the finest chocolate in the world. What was once a dying sector is being revitalised – what could be more delicious than that? ●



ANDY BARNHAM

NEW CHOC SHOP FOR TRINIDAD

You can now buy a selection of fabulous **Trinidad & Tobago Fine Cocoa Company** chocolate at its new dedicated shop in the Trinidad Hilton Hotel!