Chocolate, Unchained

By Lee Hall

In the new film version of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Willy Wonka -- played by a sleek Johnny Depp -- is a factory boss in search of exotic sweets, able to pluck plants or animals from other lands at whim. Returning to the most troubling segments of Roald Dahl's 1964 book, this year's Wonka brings "a race of tiny people called Oompa-Loompas" [1] out of their tropical huts to become chocolate processors.

A skim of on-line film reviews indicates little interest, let alone dismay, in the message that living "exotics" -- including humans -- are mere corporate resources. Likewise, few people notice that today's wealthiest chocolatiers rely on slavery to keep them in the lifestyle to which they're accustomed.

Cocoa is chocolate's main ingredient, and the vast majority of it comes from financially poor farmlands of the global south, where as many as 300,000 children handle dangerous pesticides and clear fields with machetes. [2] These are kids who have never tasted a chocolate bar. [3]

The rest of the world began to notice them five years ago, when the British Broadcasting Company's "Slavery: A Global Investigation" showed children being bought from their parents in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Togo for a nominal price, then shipped to the Ivory Coast to spend their every waking hour at work on cocoa farms. Some of the kids had visible scars from whips.

A Knight Ridder series followed up in 2001, describing children, aged 9 to 16, who had been sold off to cocoa farms. The children told reporters that they were underfed, locked in filthy dorms, and forced to carry bags of beans that were bigger than they were.

This is still going on, because chocolate companies profit richly from it, and because we don't stop them. Chocolate buyers have great leverage in this issue, and, if motivated to do so, can change the way the chocolate industry works. Collectively, the United States is the world's largest cocoa consumer.

How Fair Trade Works… And What Happens When It's Bypassed

Fair Trade is the concept that small farms can unite, set a price for a product, and distribute the profits fairly. Coffee was the first product to carry a Fair Trade logo, and it caught on with shoppers hoping to support organic cultivation methods that value the ecology as well as the workers' health. Now, chocolatiers can be certified with the Fair Trade label by buying from certain co-ops in Ghana, Cameroon, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador and Belize. As part of Fair Trade collectives, tens of thousands of farmers and their families save a percentage of community income in order to maintain schools and sanitation systems without having to depend on outside charity.

In the three years since TransFair USA began certifying chocolate and cocoa, Fair Trade has grown rapidly. But it's still only 1% of the U.S. market. If you're still buying the big brands, chances are you're unwittingly supporting scenarios where farm owners, many who can't afford trucks, must accept the terms of drivers who trade the
cocoa beans to the multinational companies in the port cities. The big exporters include Illinois-based Archer Daniels Midland (makers of Ambrosia baking ingredients), California-based Nestlé, and Minnesota-based Cargill.

As for the chocolate we see in the retailers' aisles, the biggest vendor is M&M/Mars. Mars sells Snickers, M&Ms and Dove Bars, along with the pet food brands Pedigree, KaliKan, Sheba, and Whiska's. This year Mars launched Ethel's Chocolate Lounges -- Chicago boutiques that invite customers to sample new lines of chocolates.

The three Mars siblings, Forrest, Jacqueline and John, enjoy a combined fortune exceeding $30 billion. Yet their enterprise continues to ignore the demands of thousands of people who have asked them to respect basic international legal and ethical standards. Advocates have not succeeded in shaming the high-profile purveyors of chocolate, including Mars and World's Finest, to embrace fair trade at even the modest starting level of five percent.

**Why Did It Happen To the Children?**

World cocoa prices have languished over the past twenty years. When the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund introduced adjustments compelling the Ivory Coast to dismantle its cocoa board and government supported price system, small farmers were suddenly on their own. With 70 percent of the population of the Ivory Coast tied to cocoa farms, the fall of cocoa prices in 1999 and 2000 led to the cutting of healthcare funding and teachers' salaries, and, according to the International Labor Rights Fund, to "the widespread use of cheap child labor." More than half the children working on the cocoa farms have never attended school.

When the Ivorian government tried to generate desperately needed revenue by increasing export tariffs in 2001, the multinationals simply stopped exporting -- pressuring the country to buckle under the corporation's terms. Deflecting the issue of the advantages it receives from the farmers' desperation, the chocolate industry has claimed that keeping children at home to work the fields is a practice embedded in West African culture.

**The Chocolate Sellers Sweet-Talk Congress**

In 2001, after reading shocking media reports, Representative Eliot Engel (D-New York) proposed a federal system to certify qualified cocoa products as slave-free. The measure passed in the House of Representatives -- and created a public relations scare for Mars, Hershey's, Nestlé, and other chocolate manufacturers who wouldn't qualify for the label. [4] So before the bill could reach the Senate, the Chocolate Manufacturers Association hired former senators George Mitchell and Bob Dole to lobby against it.

The industry sidelined the bill by crafting a document, in negotiation with Engel and Senator Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), which would have the industry voluntarily adopt key portions of it. This compromise, the Harkin-Engel Protocol, permitted the companies to escape the label mandate by accepting a four-year plan that would end the industry's worst abuses by July 2005.

Two months after the Protocol was signed, more than 70 advocacy groups collectively known as the Child Labor Coalition asked corporations to commit to ending exploitive child labor on cocoa farms worldwide -- not just in West Africa -- and to ensure fair compensation for farming and agricultural work. The average cocoa farming family earns between $30 and $110 dollars per household member a year.
Four Years Later: The Kids Aren't Alright

Harkin and Engel recently admitted that the plan to eliminate slavery has failed [5], but they point out that industry has given them further assurances. Lynn Bragg, president of the Chocolate Manufacturers Association, says that the industry (with over $14 billion sales annually in the U.S. alone) is giving over $5 million a year for a certification system. This means monitoring, data analysis, and activities to address the worst forms of child labor in the Ivory Coast and Ghana, with a goal of covering 50 percent of the two countries' cocoa regions by 2008.

Harkin and Engel might hope to see that cup of cocoa as half full, but corporate interests evidently see fit only to "address" the practices deemed most miserable in limited geographic portions of farmlands. That's not exactly a sweet thought.

The industry has vaunted a few pilot welfare projects, jointly developed and funded by the U.S. government, targeting rural West African households. Global Exchange describes these projects as "limited charity efforts that leave farmers at the mercy of the volatile world market and dependent on the corporations that control it.

Educational efforts, which the industry supports through the International Cocoa Initiative, presume that cocoa farmers need outsiders to teach them the value of protecting and educating their children. But absent a stable and sufficient income, farming communities are trapped in a desperate cycle, so that a tradition of moving children within the extended family to facilitate educational opportunities has been perverted by the market to enable trafficking in children.

Advocates have joined with the International Labor Rights Fund and the Fair Trade Federation to take the case against the manufacturers to the Court of International Trade. The plaintiffs intend to force the U.S. Customs Service to follow its own rules prohibiting the importation of any good produced by forced child labor. Because the Sanders Amendment of 1997 to the Tariff Act of 1930 prohibits such imports, observes Global Exchange, cocoa produced through enslavement was outlawed before the companies started all this negotiating with Congress.

The Bean Stops Here: A Guide to Enlightened Chocolate Shopping

TransFair, the independent certifier of Fair Trade practices in the United States, estimates that farmers earn about one cent for a typical 60-cent chocolate bar that's sold here. As consumers, we can use our shopping lists as direct action to stop this economic injustice and to reject slavery.

Enjoying Fair Trade chocolate also means reducing the use of harmful pesticides, and can distil the joy of chocolate from another exploitive industry: the global dairy market. Fair Trade farmers are able to invest in fermentation techniques that bring out the best from their growing regions. Selecting chocolate in its purest form brings out the true taste of the bean. And by liberating chocolate from its common role as a dairy product, choosing pure (dark) chocolate is a good way to respect the entire biocommunity. Truly good chocolate requires no grazing land.

The following Shopping Guide lists just a few examples from companies I've found so far that offer an appealing range of milk-free and fairly traded chocolate:

* Chocolate Decadence: This small company in Eugene, Oregon, is vegan-owned and -operated, and offers holiday treats, gifts, and baking ingredients. General Manager Richard Rees wrote: "I am
happy to report that not only are we a fair trade company but the company that we purchase our chocolates and added ingredients (i.e. natural flavors, nuts, pretzels, etc.) are also fair trade companies."

* **Ecco Bella**: Offers a Health by Chocolate bar, based on a recipe formulated by a professor of dermatology. Infused with cranberry seed oil and a touch of blueberry, its texture is more buoyant than most; the taste is slightly fruity, airy, and crisp. Cranberry seed oil contains natural antioxidants that keep it fresh for two years.

* **Equal Exchange**: This employee-owned company in West Bridgewater, Massachusetts offers Organic Baking Cocoa from the Dominican Republic, perfect for brownies, cakes, cookies and various desserts. As explained on its Web site, the company trades with growers who use shade-grown, chemical-free farming methods to create the natural environment preferred by native wildlife and migratory birds. Also offers two vegan dark chocolate bars.

* **Ithaca Fine Chocolates**: Sales are brisk for Ithaca Fine Chocolate's "Art Bar" -- 100% organic and the first chocolate bar in the U.S. to be certified as fairly traded. The beans come from Bolivia, and 10% of the profits go to arts education. Of the four styles of bars, two are vegan. The ingredients of the Dark Chocolate bar are: cocoa liquor, unrefined whole cane sugar, cocoa butter, ground vanilla. The ingredients of the Dark Chocolate with Coconut bar are: cocoa liquor, unrefined whole cane sugar, coconut flakes, cocoa butter, ground vanilla.

* **Green & Blacks Organic Unsweetened Cocoa**: For baking, enjoy this fairly traded, 100% organic cocoa. The beans are carefully fermented after being harvested at the perfect point of ripeness.

* **Tropical Source**: This company uses dedicated machinery for vegan chocolate, so you don’t have to think about dairy traces. Along with its chocolate bars, it offers 10-ounce packages of dark chocolate semi-sweet drops for delicate desserts; they can be found in co-ops and in most groceries with good natural food sections. The company puts effort into informing consumers that chocolate used in their product is purchased only from farms where farmers and workers are treated well.

* **Yachana Gourmet**: This company’s Jungle Chocolate from Ecuador is chocolate in its purest form - 100% roasted cacao nibs, sweetened with just a touch of cane juice. Jungle Chocolate is dairy-free and requires no refrigeration, making it the perfect choice for a high-energy trail mix, or to top off desserts or cereal. It currently comes in four styles: with dried pineapple; with Macadamia nuts; with Brazil nuts and essence of coffee; and with shredded coconut mixed with raisins. The beans are harvested with a commitment to respect the surrounding rainforest. The distributor is in Batavia, New York.

**Beyond the Borders**

* **BRITAIN -- Booja Booja**: Located in England, but they’ll ship internationally. Buy during the cooler months; the truffles are exquisite. Profits go to vegetarian initiatives when ordered through [www.viva.org.uk/shop/](http://www.viva.org.uk/shop/).

* **BRITAIN -- Divine Chocolate**: Readers in Britain can support a successful co-op in Ghana by buying Divine Chocolate. Find the vegan ones at [www.viva.org.uk/shop/](http://www.viva.org.uk/shop/).

* **CANADA -- Cocoa Camino**: This Ottawa company’s South American co-op, La Siembra, is dedicated to the idea that “each dollar people spend has the potential to act as a vote of support for more equitable trading relationships and more environmentally
sustainable agricultural techniques." Their Dark Hot Chocolate is not vegan, but they do sell 100% Cocoa Powder and Fair Trade sugars.

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REFERENCES


[2] This figure reflects a survey compiled by the International Institute for Tropical Agriculture for the U.S. Agency for International Development and released in July 2002. In 2003, the State Department estimated that approximately 109,000 children work on cocoa farms in what has been described as the worst form of child labor, and that 15,000 children had been sold into bondage to work the Ivorian cocoa plantations.


[4] See Global Exchange, "The News on Chocolate is Bittersweet: No Progress on Child Labor, but Fair Trade Chocolate is on the Rise" (June 2005) -- a source of much information relevant to this article.


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