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‘Finding Fortunato’ Review: Chasing Chocolate

The rediscovery of a rare Peruvian cacao bean was the spur for a family’s leap into the luxury chocolate business.

By Dave Shiflett

July 12, 2024 at 10:17 am ET



Sweets keep roguish company these days, sharing notoriety with red meat, tobacco, alcohol and other residents of the surgeon general’s doghouse. Perhaps it’s time to

add another boutique psychiatric disorder—glucophilia—to the list of contemporary maladies that must be avoided at all costs.

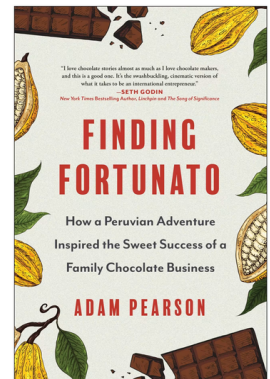
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Finding Fortunato: How a Peruvian Adventure Inspired the Sweet Success of a Family Chocolate Business

By Adam Pearson

Matt Holt

288 pages



Adam Pearson’s “Finding Fortunato” reminds us that the people who bring sweet things to the world—in this case, high-end chocolate—are far more chill than the folks who treat a Snickers bar like a hand grenade.

Mr. Pearson’s family began edging toward the chocolate business in 2007, when his father, Dan, and stepbrother, Brian, began transitioning away from their work in Peru with mining companies. Brian heard a presenter at a chamber of commerce meeting in Cajamarca discuss cacao exporting, and soon the Pearsons had started a chocolate company (funded with Dan’s life savings).

During a trip to source potential suppliers, they heard about a rare white-beaned cacao growing in the district of Huarango, which 2009 testing determined was pure *Nacional cacao*, once prized by international chocolate makers but thought to have been wiped out by disease. This was their eureka moment. Mr. Pearson, languishing in a government job in America, broke free and began learning how to market this unique product. The fledgling Fortunato Chocolate, now based in Issaquah, Wash.,

was preparing to make a splash.

Readers whose chocolate smarts begin and end with a Hershey's Kiss get a quick lesson in chocolate production: football-size cacao pods contain 30-40 grape-size seeds that are removed from the pod, fermented for five to seven days, dried for three to five days, and eventually ground and mixed with sugar and other ingredients. If the pods grow in Peru, paying off local militias and sleeping in jungle housing may be part of the mix. "Chocolate is only fancy at the very end," Mr. Pearson dryly notes.

Perseverance and help from Swiss experts resulted in the 2011 New York launch of Fortunato No. 4 (the name inspired by Chanel No. 5), an "ultraluxury" brand that the BBC called "the Rolex of chocolates" and became the prime ingredient in Anthony Bourdain and Eric Ripert's Good & Evil bar, which at \$18 for two ounces was not a hit. Yet during the chefs' visit to Huarango to shoot an episode of the TV show "Parts Unknown" about the Pearsons' chocolate operation, they dazzled locals with a mashed-potato dish boasting one part potato, two parts butter—a reminder that, while the surgeon general's dietary tips are well-intentioned, the alternatives taste better.

—*Mr. Shiflett posts his music and original writing at Daveshiflett.com.*

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