

# PEOPLE

BY ANDREA VANSCOY

## SWEET SUCCESS

One day, Tom left his mainstream job of 17 years to spend several months reading library books on his couch, looking for his life's mission, his heart's desire and his means of independence and financial support. Nearly a year passed before he jumped up from the sofa, announcing, "I will make chocolates for fun and prosperity!"

"That's the Hollywood version," Tom Pedersen laughs. He prefers to tell the story using his trademark effusive metaphors. "It was a roller coaster! At one point, it was like we were flying and we were hearing the tops of the trees hit the bottom of the plane thinking, 'oh we're going down!'"

Instead, he became a successful businessman and chocolatier, often known as Tom the Chocolate Guy. In fact, he's been a chocolate guy for decades.

"When I was a little kid," Tom recalls, "I had a dark-chocolate-covered cherry that just blew my mind. I think that happens to everybody. You have some experience in life that really peels your brain back and sometimes you find your way back to it."

That took several years. In 1977, Tom transferred from Virginia Commonwealth University to UT Austin. Entering as a pre-med student, he ultimately graduated with a BFA and did a stint as a Sixth Street oyster shucker, among other things, before making a living tending bar. A habit of always having a cold beer ready for a regular customer eventually paid off—that customer was a high-ranking state official who offered Tom a job that eventually led to a long-term gig as a writer/producer for the State of Texas. And that's the job he eventually left in favor of the couch, the library books and the Chocolate Revelation.

"Do you like chocolate?" he likes to ask. "That's always my question. Because almost everyone says yes, right? But every now and then, people say no and I just want to put a *mile* between me and *that* person right away!" Chocolate, he realized, was an obsession he wanted to share.

"So, I'm thinking about chocolate," he continues. "I did research at the Benson Latin American Collection at UT about cocoa's historical roots, trying to figure out what makes chocolate tick. I knew I wanted to go back to the source."

He knew he had to begin with raw, fermented and dried cocoa beans from the pods of the cacao tree. But high-quality varieties were surprisingly hard to find.



"Finally," Tom recounts, "the president of this South American chocolate company, whom I had been e-mailing and calling and probably bugging the heck out of, responded." Soon after, Tom received a few handfuls of beans, via FedEx. "It was a miracle," he recalls. "I thought, *you can just roast them and eat them? Like nuts?*"

He could. And he soon found that he could do much more.

"I didn't just want to be an imitator, contributing to the noise," he says. "I wanted something unique and exquisite."

Kakáwa Beans are labor-intensive. Tom uses a variety of the Criollo bean, a rare variety once prized by the Toltecs, Aztecs and Olmecs, and now considered a delicacy by choco-philes. He still handpicks the very

best from each shipment and, as he says, "takes them to show."

That show begins with gentle roasting, followed by rolling beans in a sequence of premium white, milk and dark chocolates, dredging them in cocoa ground from the same fine beans, and sealing them in shiny red bags.

Popping one of Tom's beans in your mouth is a multisensory experience. First you feel the cocoa powder dissolving; then three distinct chocolates melt and turn to a blend of creams on your tongue. You, and those around you, hear a delicate snapping as the bean crumbles and your nose fills with ancient aromas. Kakáwa's subtle flavors prompt some tasters to use words attributed to fine cabernets: pecan, raspberry, cinnamon, honey, even olive, leather, licorice and tobacco.

An instant hit at the Austin Farmers' Market, where they still sell out early in the day, Kakáwa Beans were featured last year in *Saveur* magazine's annual "Our Favorite 100 Things." In Tennessee, the luxury Blackberry Farm Hotel makes a point of presenting them to every guest. Tom's Cocoa Puro company also makes bags of roasted cocoa "nibs," a hot chocolate mix for fall, a cocoa butter lip balm and a spice coin with a flavor similar to a mole sauce for grating into a variety of sweet and savory foods.

To put it mildly, the couch time was worth it. Except, of course, that Tom would never put it mildly.

"I jumped into the void," he explains. "Then the heavens opened up and threw me a cougar. Now I can die and go to chocolate heaven."

Luckily, so can we.

*For where to find Kakáwa Beans, visit [cocoapuro.com](http://cocoapuro.com).*