

The Rhone Valley is known across the world for its fine wines but the area has another sometimes unknown treasure, the chocolate. In 2013, Valrhona, the luxury chocolate factory opened a museum entirely dedicated to the chocolate. The City of Chocolate is now a must visit for tourists and foodies.

The City of Chocolate is located in Tain L'Hermitage, a small town just 55 miles south of Lyon between the Rhone River and a hill with lots of vineyards. In the 1920s, Albéric Guironnet, a pastry chef from Tournon-sur-Rhone settled in Tain L'Hermitage, on the other side of the river. Almost one century later, Valrhona chocolate has become a benchmark among professionals with 20,000 clients worldwide, including China. While on an official trip to France in 2014, Xi Jinping's wife Peng Liyuan told local press that she knew the luxury brand.

The City of Chocolate is an attempt by Valrhona to connect directly with consumers. In 2006, Frank Vidal, who was Marketing Manager at that time, proposed a plan to "extend people's knowledge, by showing how chocolate is made". 170,000 fine food lovers have visited The City of Chocolate since the opening.

A Tasting Experience

These foodies would not be disappointed. Up to 15 tasting sessions are offered throughout the visit. "The knowledge of chocolate begins with appreciating its tastes. Bitter, sour, sweet,

fruity, salty..." After crossing a chocolate waterfall the size of a wall, visitors reach two tasting stations. A video explains how one should eat a piece of chocolate. "Tourists must insert the ticket into the terminal to appreciate the differences between the chocolates".

Then, visitors are asked to select flavors that are best combined with chocolate, and to match desserts with the smooth or rough textures they touch with their hands.

The visitors can also enjoy the strong and sharp sound of someone crunching a chocolate bar or the softer sound of someone eating chocolate mousse with a spoon. We learn that the percentage of cocoa in chocolate doesn't change the flavor. "The level of cocoa in chocolate makes little difference, and cocoa butter has no taste at all, just as high level of alcohol doesn't necessarily make a good wine." Most chocolate is made with white sugar (34%), cocoa butter (27%), dried milk (23%) and cocoa nibs (14%) and the combination of these ingredients makes the taste.

From the Plantations to the Factory

Instructional videos made by local producers explain the daily work in a cocoa plantation. Harvests, fermentation, drying. In Madagascar, a dozen of people work on a plot of land of several hectares. The pods, which contain the cocoa beans, grow directly on the trunks. Cocoa trees are planted next to banana trees. "The small cocoa seeding needs shade, which means larger trees have to be there throughout the growing process. When the cocoa tree reaches 3 meters, the banana tree is cut down and replaced by an even larger tree", Frank Vidal explains.

Next come the different steps of the manufacturing process, the flushing, the roasting which enhances the flavors and aromas, and the crushing which breaks the cocoa beans into small pieces called cocoa nibs. These are grinded into a paste, before sugar is

A City of CHOCOLATE

added. Finally, the conching refines the flavor by blending the chocolate for several days. The final taste depends on the origins and processes of the cocoas. "A longer roast can give very different flavors, even if the original cocoa is the same," Frank Vidal adds. "We are currently working on new and fruitier flavors made with oranges and tropical fruits by changing the production process and the fermentation".

Sometimes the best recipe comes from an act of thoughtlessness with an unexpected outcome. Valrhona sells a blond chocolate which was discovered two years ago, when a white chocolate heated for too long. Frederic Bau, the creative Director, noticed that the chocolate had changed color and tasted great.

A Culinary Art from the Heart

The visit ends with the "archi-choco" exhibit. A local pastry chef worked with a designer to create chocolate models inspired by existing landmarks. "Our craftsmen mold the chocolate", showing both their artistic talent and their "culinary knowledge", Frank Vidal thinks. "This culinary expertise is taught to food professionals within Valrhona's schools right behind the museum. It also provides knowledge to a broader audience in amateur workshops. Preparations and tastings of desserts are on the agenda: Chocolate eclairs, macarons, entremets, cream cookies."

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