Project Overview

Bean & Beast is a fictional chocolate brand but the work behind it is as real and rigorous as anything I've ever built. This capstone UX case study represents the most complete and intentional project in my portfolio: a fully imagined, research-driven, character-based e-commerce experience designed from scratch using the **full design thinking framework**. I created everything. The brand, the characters, the product architecture, the storytelling, the Figma prototypes, the Vue 3 + Tailwind codebase, to prove a single point: **I'm more than ready to work professionally as a UX designer**.

The idea was sparked by a series of six animal silhouette artworks I created for fun. The moment I saw them together, I thought: *this could be a chocolate brand*. That simple thought evolved into a deep UX challenge, how might I build a boutique, emotionally resonant, visually striking chocolate brand from the ground up? What began as a design exercise turned into a multi-week project blending **branding, product strategy, storytelling, and front-end development**, all grounded in UX best practices.

From Crazy 8s and user interviews to reusable code components and dynamic product modals, *Bean & Beast* became my personal benchmark and a way to test every UX skill I've learned and every instinct I've sharpened. Unlike my earlier work, this project wasn't about reacting to a need. It was about building something from nothing, and doing it deliberately, professionally, and with the user at the center of every decision.

The Problem

Most chocolate brands play it safe. Their packaging is generic. Their websites are templated. And their messaging rarely goes beyond surface-level ideas like "indulgence" or "luxury." This might be fine for a quick snack. But it falls short when chocolate is meant to be a gift or a personal experience.

When I studied the market, I saw an opportunity. There was no shortage of beautiful brands or premium flavors. But very few chocolate companies combined **storytelling, identity, and UX** into one cohesive experience. Even fewer gave users a reason to connect emotionally with the product.

This gap became clear during my early research. I interviewed several millennial users. Many told me they enjoyed chocolate but didn't think about it often. They bought it casually or during travel. But when they gifted it, they wanted it to feel special. That meant better packaging, a deeper story, and a flavor that felt intentional.

At the same time, I noticed a UX challenge. People had strong personal preferences, but struggled to choose the "right" chocolate for a mood, moment, or recipient. They wanted guidance, not just a product list. This opened the door to more thoughtful features like quizzes, filters, or personalized flows.

I also realized this problem wasn't just about chocolate. It was about connection. People wanted to feel proud of what they bought or gifted. They wanted their purchase to say something about their taste, their identity, and the person they were giving it to.

In short, the problem wasn't a lack of quality chocolate. The problem was a lack of meaningful UX.

The Solution – Empathize

Before designing anything, I focused on understanding the people I was designing for. I began by interviewing five millennials, ages 33 to 41. I chose this group because they reflected the kind of design-conscious, emotionally driven shoppers I imagined as ideal customers. Each conversation lasted about 15 to 20 minutes. I asked about their chocolate habits, gifting preferences, and how they choose between brands.

From these interviews, I created two empathy maps and a full user journey map. These artifacts helped me step into the mindset of users like Kevin and Lisa. Kevin buys chocolate mainly as a gift. He looks for good design and emotional impact. Lisa, on the other hand, buys chocolate during travel. She prefers interesting flavors and thoughtful packaging that feels like a keepsake. Both of them value design, story, and personal connection more than just price or convenience.

I also gathered key insights from the interviews and grouped them into themes. One theme was that people eat chocolate often, but rarely think about it as a product. It becomes meaningful only when it's shared, gifted, or tied to an experience. Another insight was that design, taste, and story need to work together. No one wanted to buy chocolate just because it looked cool. They also wanted it to taste good and feel intentional.

Flavor balance was another common point. Most people disliked chocolate that was too sweet or too bitter. They preferred smooth, nuanced flavors and clean texture. Several also mentioned that chocolate feels more premium when paired with adult routines, like having it with coffee or wine.

Lastly, context mattered. People bought chocolate in three main situations: as a self-treat, in social settings, or while traveling. Each of these use cases had different emotional drivers. For example, gifting required a sense of thoughtfulness. Impulse

buys needed visual impact. And travel chocolates leaned on uniqueness or cultural cues.

All of this pointed to a bigger idea. Chocolate wasn't just a product. It was a vessel for emotion, identity, and memory. That became the foundation for Bean & Beast.

To deepen my understanding, I also studied packaging, brand voice, and structure across other chocolate brands. I took notes on visual tone, website layouts, hierarchy, and personality. Many brands were elegant but cold. Others were quirky but unfocused. Very few struck a balance between emotional storytelling and clear UX.

By the end of this phase, I had a clear vision. My goal was to build a chocolate brand rooted in emotional connection. It would be giftable, personal, and visually distinct. Each product would have a personality. Every flavor would feel like a character. And every decision, from color to copy, would support that story.

The Solution – Define

With my research complete, I moved into defining the core problem and user needs. I began by writing a clear problem statement:

Kevin and Lisa need a way to discover and gift chocolate that feels premium, personal, and visually distinctive because they value thoughtful experiences and are often disappointed by generic, overly sweet, and mass-produced options.

From there, I crafted a goal statement to guide the rest of the work:

Bean & Beast will let culturally curious, design-conscious users discover and gift unique chocolate flavors through a visually striking and emotionally engaging experience so they feel excited, connected, and proud of their purchase.

To generate focused ideas, I created five "How Might We" questions:

1. How might we make chocolate feel more personal and gift-worthy, even at first glance?

2. How might we turn the act of buying chocolate into a small, delightful discovery?

3. How might we help users choose the right chocolate for a mood, occasion, or recipient?

4. How might we give users a reason to explore all six flavors and connect with the brand story?

5. How might we design for both in-store impulse buys and intentional online gifting?

These questions helped anchor both the UX strategy and the brand itself. I explored each one through lists of UX ideas and interactive features. Many of those ideas directly influenced the final site structure and product system. For example, the quiz feature, dynamic product pages, animal lore system, and emotional copywriting all trace back to these questions.

I also created user personas based on my empathy maps and interviews. Kevin became a stand-in for the gift-focused user. Lisa represented the travel-inspired, design-conscious buyer. These personas helped shape decisions about tone, layout, product packaging, and feature priorities.

At this point, I knew that story would be the heart of the experience. But it couldn't be forced or overly abstract. Every element had to feel personal and intuitive. That meant building a system where character, flavor, and visual identity were tied together through structure and logic.

This phase gave me a clear path forward. I wasn't just making a brand. I was solving for a specific emotional and experiential gap in the chocolate market. That clarity helped make every decision that followed feel purposeful and grounded.

The Solution – Ideate

Once I had a clear understanding of the users and their needs, I moved into ideation. This was the most creatively open phase of the process, but it was still grounded in logic. Every idea had to support at least one of the "How Might We" questions. I didn't just want to make a good-looking site. I wanted to build an experience that felt personal, emotional, and thoughtfully designed.

To get the process started, I did five Crazy 8s sketching exercises — one for each HMW question. These helped me push beyond surface-level solutions. I sketched quickly and broadly, exploring a wide range of ideas. From those sketches, I pulled out the strongest concepts and translated them into digital notes and system ideas. Many of them ended up becoming real features on the final site.

Here are a few examples:

For HMW 1: *How might we make chocolate feel more personal and gift-worthy?*

- I imagined gift tags on product cards like "Perfect for birthdays" or "A small thank-you."

- I sketched a build-your-own gift box flow with custom ribbons and color labels.

- I explored personalization features like gift notes or packaging previews.

For HMW 2: *How might we turn the act of buying chocolate into a small, delightful discovery?*

- I thought about interactive elements like a "Surprise Me" button that added a random bar to your cart.

- I wrote out an early version of the character quiz to help match users with a chocolate bar that fits their vibe.

- I explored storytelling through hover reveals, collectible lore cards, and animated character moments.

For HMW 3: *How might we help users choose the right chocolate for a mood or occasion?*

- I sketched a mood slider where users could filter by emotions like "playful" or "calm."

- I added ideas for filtering chocolate by relationship type — for friends, partners, coworkers, or parents.

- I also listed possible category tags like "bold and spicy" or "soft and sweet" to use across product pages.

For HMW 4: *How might we encourage users to explore all six bars?*

- I imagined a digital stamp card where users could unlock all six flavors and get a bonus.

- I considered lore-based features like story unlocks, limited-time animal arcs, and a "Which Beast Are You?" quiz that assigned users a chocolate identity.

- These ideas evolved into the site's lore pages and quiz results structure.

For HMW 5: *How might we design for both in-store impulse buys and online gifting?*

- I noted ideas like QR codes on wrappers that linked to animal backstories.

- I sketched mockups of packaging that could preview scale and fit in users' hands.

- I included bonus ideas like shareable badges, gift receipts, and an in-store card guide.

This ideation phase made one thing very clear, the user experience couldn't be separated from the brand. Every character had to feel real. Every bar had to feel like a story. And every element of the design system had to reinforce that feeling. From interactive features to packaging ideas to category logic, I was shaping the foundation of what Bean & Beast would become.

At the end of this phase, I prioritized the most feasible and emotionally impactful features. I selected the best ideas based on time, technical skill, and storytelling strength. Those ideas became the building blocks for the wireframes and prototypes that followed.

The Solution – Prototype & Build

With the core ideas defined and prioritized, I moved into the prototyping and build phase. For the first time in my design journey, I followed the full UX process from paper wireframes to high-fidelity mockups. This structure allowed me to focus deeply on usability, visual hierarchy, and flow before writing a single line of code.

I began with hand-drawn wireframes to block out user flows. This helped me clarify what screens I needed and where key decisions would happen. Once I had those flows mapped, I transitioned into Figma to create low-fidelity wireframes. These helped me define layout, spacing, and content structure. From there, I built high-fidelity prototypes that reflected the final branding, color palettes, typography, and UI components.

This was my first time using Figma in a structured way, and it completely changed how I approached design. I realized how much more freedom I had to experiment when I wasn't thinking about code. This shift allowed me to level up my visual design skills and focus entirely on user interaction. Each page and component was built with intent.

When it came time to code, I started fresh. I built the site using Vue 3 and Tailwind CSS, with a central Pinia store to manage all product and modal data. From the start, I made a rule for myself: no post-refactoring. That meant every decision had to be thought through and organized before implementation. I commented and sectioned my files with clear labels. I created custom utility classes using Tailwind's @apply directive to style buttons, sections, and layout containers consistently across the entire site.

The codebase was structured around reusability. For example, every product card used the same component, with props controlling flavor, character, and styling. The SectionTitle component made it easy to maintain consistency in layout. V-for loops connected to the Pinia store allowed dynamic routing and detail pages for each chocolate bar, merch item, and gift set. This architecture not only saved time, it made the site more scalable and easier to maintain.

I also built a custom cart modal that changed behavior depending on product type. Single bars and merch used a quantity selector. Gift sets used a mini configurator where users could select bars by clicking from a list. Cart data persisted globally through the store, and the cart icon updated in real time. I created a four-step checkout view using nested components and step logic to simulate a real purchase flow.

Even though the site doesn't include real payments or backend logic, I treated the UX as if it were launching for a real customer. I added an empty-cart fallback state with illustrations and prompts. I created placeholder product filters and designed future-facing features like a flavor quiz and gift note fields. Every page was responsive, and the design system scaled down cleanly to mobile screens.

From a branding perspective, I also created all mockups and packaging designs using Envato templates, Canva, and Photopea. I designed the animal illustrations and abstract color palettes based on color theory principles and cultural inspiration. The end result was a bold, distinct, emotionally expressive system that felt both giftable and collectible.

This project is the most complex I've built to date. But because I started with strong UX structure and designed everything with purpose, the process was smooth and focused. I didn't waste time chasing fixes or redoing work. The groundwork I laid in research, ideation, and prototyping paid off every step of the way.

Outcome

Bean & Beast is not just my most polished UX project. It is the clearest proof that I am ready to do this work professionally.

So far, I have only shown the site to five trusted people. Each of them gave unfiltered, honest reactions. Every single person assumed it was a real product. One said, "It looks amazing. This looks like a real brand." Another said, "Dude, this is legit. I want to buy a set of six right now." My wife, who has seen all of my past projects in detail, called it "your masterpiece." That meant a lot. One friend simply said, "I can't believe you did this in about ten days."

What surprised people most was how fast it came together. But it didn't feel rushed. I had already spent months preparing. I studied the design thinking framework. I practiced Figma, Vue, and Tailwind. I improved both my visual design skills and my technical structure. So when it was time to execute, everything moved quickly because I was ready.

The final product is a fully responsive, brand-driven e-commerce site. It includes emotional storytelling, reusable components, and a structured product system. Every part of the site was created with intention, from packaging and page layout to quiz logic and modal flow. The work reflects everything I've learned about UX. It shows my ability to take a project from research all the way through to implementation, using strategy, structure, and care.

I haven't conducted formal usability testing yet due to time and scheduling. But I plan to return to the same five people I interviewed at the start and have them test the live site. I will observe how they interact with the filters, quiz, and navigation. This next round of testing will help guide future improvements. I want to continue shaping Bean & Beast based on real feedback and behavior.

Even without testing data yet, the early reactions have been strong. More importantly, I know the work is solid. Bean & Beast represents everything I've built up to. It is more than a portfolio project. It is the most complete expression of my UX thinking, technical ability, and creative direction. It is a statement of readiness.

Reflection & Lessons Learned

Bean & Beast taught me how powerful the full UX process can be when followed with purpose. I started this project with a clear goal. I wanted to prove that I could take an idea from scratch and bring it to life as a real, thoughtful, emotionally resonant product. I

wanted it to look and feel like something you could actually buy. And I wanted it to show that I am more than ready to be a working UX designer.

From the very beginning, structure was everything. I started with paper wireframes. I made empathy maps, journey maps, personas, and Crazy 8s sketches. I followed the design thinking framework from start to finish. That structure didn't slow me down. It helped me focus. I stopped guessing. I stopped second-guessing. I worked with intent and clarity every step of the way.

This was also the first time I used Figma the way professionals use it. Designing screens without thinking about code helped me level up fast. My visual instincts got sharper. I started caring more about spacing, hierarchy, and flow. Once I had strong mockups, the build process became much smoother.

In Vue, I made better decisions because I was thinking like a UX designer. I built everything with reusability and logic in mind. I used the Pinia store to manage product data. I used props and components to avoid repetition. I made sure the site was scalable and flexible. The more I built, the more I saw how design thinking applied to code.

Looking back, I'm proud that I didn't cut corners. I didn't use placeholder ideas. I didn't skip ahead. I followed the process and it paid off. The site looks clean, works smoothly, and communicates a full brand experience. But more than that, it feels like me. It reflects how I think. How I work. How I care.

This project didn't just show me what I'm capable of. It changed how I see myself. I'm not just someone who learned UX. I'm someone who can take a blank page and turn it into a professional, functioning product. With this project, I stopped being a student. I became a designer.