

From Cacao Pod to Chocolate Bar: The Journey Behind Every Square

You pick up a piece of chocolate. You taste it. Maybe you love it. Maybe you don't. But you probably don't think about the 400-plus days, thousands of miles, and dozens of hands that brought that one square to your mouth.

We do. And the story is worth knowing—especially if you care about flavour, quality, or where your food comes from.

The Journey Starts in the Tropics

Cacao grows in a narrow band around the equator. Places like Ecuador, Madagascar, Ghana, and Peru. The tree is finicky—it demands shade, humidity, and soil that's rich but not waterlogged. Farmers who grow cacao aren't just farmers. They're botanists, weathermen, and problem-solvers all at once.

It takes 5–7 years for a cacao tree to produce its first beans. Five years. In most businesses, that would mean waiting half a decade to see a return. But cacao farmers know something about patience.

Once the tree matures, it flowers year-round, but there are two main harvest seasons. Farmers look for pods that are ripe—usually deep red or yellow depending on the variety. A machete cuts each pod from the tree (you can't just pull them), and inside are 20–50 beans covered in white, sticky pulp.

This is where the flavour journey actually begins.

Fermentation: Where the Magic Happens

Here's the secret nobody tells you: fresh cacao beans taste *terrible*. Bitter, astringent, mouth-puckering awful. That magic chocolate flavour? It doesn't exist yet.

Enter fermentation.

Farmers pile freshly harvested beans (still wrapped in their white pulp) into boxes or pits and let them sit. For days. Often a week. The temperature rises naturally as naturally occurring yeasts and bacteria go to work. The beans begin to break down internally, and something remarkable happens: flavours develop.

This is where terroir—that wine-tasting concept—comes into play with chocolate. The microbes in Ecuadorian soil are different from Ghanaian soil. The climate, the altitude, the water—all of it influences which microbes show up to the fermentation party. Different microbes = different flavours. A Madagascar cacao fermented for four days tastes completely different from a Peruvian cacao fermented for six.

Quality matters here. Some farmers have been perfecting their fermentation process for generations. Others? They're still learning. The difference shows up in your cup.

Drying: Locking in the Flavour

After fermentation, the beans still have too much moisture. They need to dry—usually spread across large beds or raised platforms in the sun. This takes about a week, and it requires constant

attention. The beans are turned by hand to ensure even drying. Too fast, and the flavours become harsh. Too slow, and mould sets in. The farmer is essentially tempering the fermentation process, locking in the work that's been done.

By the time the beans are dry, they've transformed completely. They're smaller, darker, and they've developed a papery shell. Inside, the cacao nibs are ready for their next phase.

The Long Journey

Once dried, the beans are bagged and shipped. And here's where logistics gets interesting. A shipment of cacao from Ecuador might travel:

1. By truck to a port.
2. By container ship across the Atlantic (2–3 weeks).
3. By truck to a cacao processor or trader's warehouse.
4. Then eventually to a chocolatier's facility.

The entire journey from pod to chocolate maker can take months. During that time, the beans are stored carefully—too humid and they absorb moisture, too dry and they become brittle. Temperature swings can degrade flavour. This is why some chocolatiers work directly with specific farmers or importers they trust. They know their beans traveled well and arrived in peak condition.

We work with a small network of specialty importers who share our obsession with quality. For our Madagascar cacao, we know the altitude where it was grown (1,200 meters above sea level), the fermentation duration (6 days), and the farmer's name. That's not romance—that's traceability. And traceability means we know exactly what we're working with.

Roasting: Unlocking Hidden Flavours

The beans arrive at the chocolate maker's facility still wrapped in their shell. First stop: the roaster. Temperature, duration, and air flow are carefully controlled. Roast too hot and the cacao becomes acrid and burnt. Roast too cool and the dormant flavours never wake up.

At Chocolat on James, our roasting profiles are specific to each origin. Our Ecuador cacao gets roasted differently than our Ghana cacao. Same with Madagascar. We've spent years dialling in the roast for each bean because the goal is never to destroy the unique character that fermentation and origin gave it. The roast should enhance, not overshadow.

This is where a chocolatier's real skill shows up. Any facility can roast beans. Not every facility can roast them *well*.

Winnowing and Grinding: From Bean to Liquid

After roasting, the beans go into a winnower—a machine that cracks the shell and separates the nib from the shell. What's left is the cacao nib: pure cacao, about 50% cocoa butter and 50% cocoa solids.

These nibs are then ground. For hours. As they grind, friction creates heat, and the cocoa butter (which is solid at room temperature) begins to melt. Eventually, the nibs transform into a thick, dark liquid—pure cacao. No additives. Just cacao that's been mechanically broken down so much that all the cocoa butter has released and mixed with the solids.

This liquid is called cacao liquor or cacao paste. It's the foundation of everything that comes next.

Conching: The Final Refinement

Here's where most people's understanding stops, but the best chocolatiers know the real work is just beginning.

Cacao liquor, fresh from the grinder, is rough. The particles are too large for a smooth chocolate. Enter the conche—a machine that rolls, grinds, and aerates the cacao for hours (sometimes days). As it conches, the chocolatier is adding other ingredients: cocoa butter (to adjust texture), sugar (carefully measured), and sometimes lecithin (to aid flow).

During conching, volatile flavours are released—some you want to keep, some you want to let go. The heat and aeration are carefully controlled. Too aggressive, and you lose the delicate florality. Too gentle, and the chocolate stays gritty.

This is an art. Different chocolatiers conch for different durations and at different temperatures. The difference between a 12-hour conche and a 24-hour conche shows up in the final chocolate—in the mouthfeel, the way it melts, the way flavours unfold.

Tempering: Creating the Perfect Snap

Now you have chocolate. Liquid, smooth, flavourful chocolate. But it's not ready yet.

Chocolate is polymorphic—it can crystallize in different ways. Untempered chocolate will be streaky, dull, and will melt unevenly in your mouth. Tempered chocolate is glossy, snaps when you break it, and melts smoothly at body temperature.

Tempering involves heating the chocolate to a specific temperature, cooling it, reheating it again (the temperatures vary depending on whether it's dark, milk, or white chocolate). This process aligns the cocoa butter crystals in the most stable form.

It's technical. It's precise. And it's absolutely essential if you want chocolate that looks and tastes right.

Moulding and Finishing: The Final Touch

Once tempered, the chocolate is poured into moulds. At Chocolat on James, we use moulds of different sizes and shapes depending on what we're making. A single-origin square gets a different mould than a ganache-filled truffle.

As the chocolate cools, those aligned crystals lock into place. The result? That satisfying snap when you break a piece. That glossy finish. That smooth, even melt.

Some of our chocolates are finished simply—just chocolate, nothing else. Others are filled, decorated, or dusted with gold leaf or cocoa powder. But the foundation is always the same: quality beans, careful roasting, skilled conching, precise tempering.

Why This Matters

You could buy cheap chocolate. It's everywhere. It's made with lower-grade beans, heavily processed, filled with fillers and cocoa butter replacements. It's designed to be shelf-stable and cheap, not memorable.

When you buy Chocolat on James, you're buying chocolate that respects every step of this journey. We work with farmers who care about fermentation. We roast for *that specific bean*, not "all dark

chocolate.” We conche long enough to develop smoothness without losing character. We temper precisely. We finish thoughtfully.

The difference isn’t subtle. It’s in the aroma when you open the package. It’s in the snap when you break a piece. It’s in the way flavour unfolds as it melts. It’s in the fact that you *remember* tasting it.

That’s what 400+ days and thousands of miles gets you.

Know Your Chocolate’s Story

Next time you taste chocolate, ask: Where did it come from? How long was it fermented? Who roasted it? These aren’t pretentious questions. They’re the questions that separate mass-produced confection from craft chocolate.

We’re happy to tell you the story of every chocolate we make. Because we know it. Because we care about it. And because we think you will too.

FAQ

How can I tell if chocolate is high-quality? Look for single-origin labelling (it tells you where the cacao came from). Check the ingredient list—quality chocolate should have few ingredients: cacao, sugar, cocoa butter. Check the snap and shine—tempered chocolate looks glossy and snaps cleanly. Finally, taste it—quality chocolate melts smoothly on your tongue and has complex flavours.

What’s the difference between fair trade and regular cacao? Fair trade certification means farmers are paid a guaranteed minimum price, and there’s traceability. We work with fair-trade-certified suppliers because we believe cacao farmers should benefit from the premium their beans command.

Why does single-origin chocolate cost more? Single-origin chocolate is traceable—you know exactly where the beans came from and how they were processed. It requires smaller batches, more careful roasting, and direct relationships with farmers. Mass-produced chocolate blends beans from many sources and processes them at industrial scale, which is cheaper but loses character.

How should I store chocolate? Keep it cool and dry—ideally between 15–18°C. Avoid moisture and fluctuating temperatures. Stored well, chocolate can last 6–12 months or longer. Avoid the fridge unless you live somewhere very hot; temperature swings can cause bloom (that white film on chocolate).

Can I visit the facility and see how chocolate is made? We offer guided tastings and occasionally run workshops. Contact us to ask about scheduling a behind-the-scenes experience.

Want to taste the difference? [CTA Button: Explore Our Single-Origin Collection]

Internal Links: Our Story, Single-Origin Collection, Chocolate Tasting Guide, Farmer Partnerships

Meta Title: How Chocolate Is Made | Bean-to-Bar Journey from Cacao Farm

Meta Description: Discover the story behind our chocolate. From cacao farming to roasting to

tempering—the journey from bean to bar at Chocolat on James.