

# Cultured Cacao

NOKA Chocolate founders **Noah Houghton** and **Katrina Merrem**

have committed to change the world's thinking about chocolate, presenting it in its purest, most decadent form

BY HOLLY H. GOFF PHOTOGRAPHED BY KA YEUNG

WHEN FINE CHOCOLATE COMES TO MIND, YOU MIGHT VISUALIZE THE snowy mountaintops of Switzerland, a country with a history of producing exquisite sweets. Perhaps it was merely a subtle influence, but it makes sense that Noah Houghton and his wife, Katrina Merrem, were vacationing in the land of the Alps when the idea for NOKA Chocolate was born.

Houghton and Merrem give the magnificent Matterhorn mountain some of the credit for inspiring a life-changing decision. “We were high above the picturesque town of Zermatt on a beautiful summer day. The air was crisp, the sun gloriously warm and bright, and the tranquil silence accompanied only by the whisper of a gentle breeze,” Merrem says. “At that moment, we decided we would both leave our careers in accounting and finance to pursue something more fulfilling.”

What the two deemed more fulfilling was to change the way the world looks at chocolate, one dark, delicious piece at a time. NOKA—the name a combination of the couple's first names—is based on the concept of single-estate chocolate. While most chocolate is derived from several different regions, NOKA uses cacao beans from a single estate, farm, or plantation, resulting in a pure product. “Because our beans aren't blended with other

cacao beans, you experience incredibly wonderful and complex aromas, tastes, and textures,” Houghton says.

Committed to selecting the purest and highest-quality ingredients, the two searched for cacao sources that would provide the most luxurious confections. They found what they were looking for at estates in Côte d'Ivoire, Ecuador, Trinidad and Tobago, and Venezuela. “Our journey was with our taste buds,” Merrem says.

Cacao grows best 20 degrees north and south of the equator. “The environment in which the cacao is grown is a critical determinant of its taste,” Merrem says. “It's amazing that while the ingredients are identical in proportion, the appearance, texture, and resulting flavor are different in the pieces from each region.”

Intriguing and exotic, all of the chocolates contain a minimum of 75 percent cacao. If you've ever noticed the percentages listed on the packaging for gourmet chocolate, you know that number means an extremely rich chocolate. And instead of focusing on developing different shapes, forms, and flavors, NOKA keeps it simple, offering only dark pieces and truffles. Unlike other candies, NOKA products don't contain added flavors, such as vanilla or soy lecithin. It's all about the pure, unblended cocoa. One ingredient of the brand's Grand Cru Truffles is fresh organic cream,

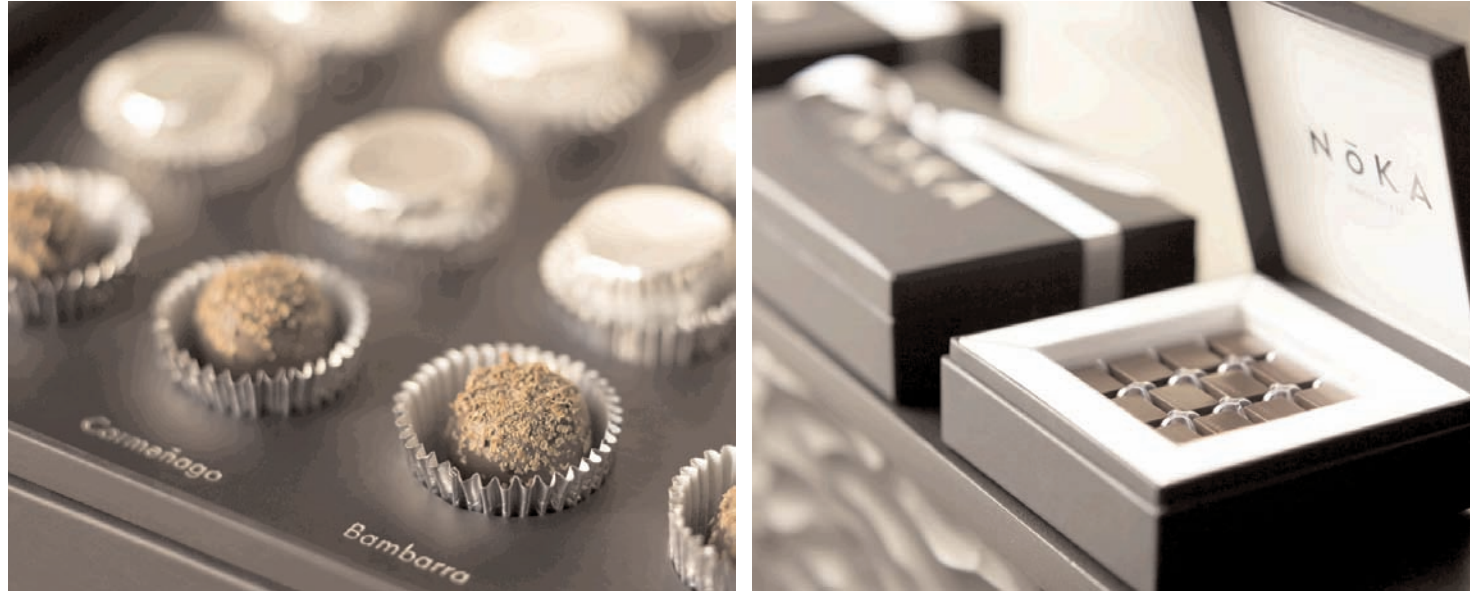
Truffle tasters are encouraged to savor each delicate piece and explore its distinctive flavors, which include notes of citrus, berries, coconut, and caramel. NOKA makes it its mission to protect and develop the natural aromas and flavors of the cacao bean.



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# Food & Wine



Above, left and right: The Grand Cru Truffles Collection (left) and the Vintages Collection both contain an assortment of each of the four flavor profiles: Vivienté, Carmeñago, Bambarra, and Tamborina. Below: The contemporary packaging is an extension of the owners' affection for clean lines and simplicity.

hence the accompanying note suggesting that tasters enjoy them within seven days. “We want people to taste and explore the natural flavors, so our ingredient list is one of the shortest you’ll find when it comes to chocolates and truffles,” Merrem says.

If the technical speak reminds you of the world of wine tasting, you’re not alone. Most likely you are accustomed to hearing the term *single-estate* when it comes to grapes, but the NOKA owners associate the concept with their craft as well. “Chocolate and wine do have some similarities— incredible aroma, texture, and flavor,” Merrem says. “When tasting either, you want to stimulate and engage all of your senses.”

To ensure a palate-pleasing tasting, Houghton and Merrem offer their advice. Experiencing (not just eating) the luxurious treats should last a few moments. Encouraging you to listen for a “clear, crisp snap” as you break the chocolate and let it melt in your mouth, the tasting directives accompanying each box again bring wine tasting to mind. Much like wine tasters who see, swirl, sniff, sip, and savor, chocolate connoisseurs should “be present,”



“admire its beauty,” and “explore the aromas.”

While they’re passionate about their chocolates, neither Houghton nor Merrem plays favorites. “In the morning I prefer the Vivienté because it’s lively, with wonderful citrus notes,” says Houghton. “In the evening, after dinner, I would probably select our rich-flavored Carmeñago or Tamborina.”

Spoken like a sommelier selecting which red or white to pair with dinner. Also stated like a true gourmet and lover of chocolate who wants to show the world that the cacao bean can create a magical moment. 🍫

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For 5,000 InCircle points, indulge in the NOKA 24-piece Vintages Collection and the 4-piece Grand Cru Truffles Collection.

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