

Welcome to the world of the Master Chocolatier

Andrew Thwaite, head chocolatier, tells [Helena Parker](#) about the York Chocolate Story and life-size chocolate rowing boats

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Photo courtesy of York Chocolate Story

Sitting at my desk, I have the rare experience of eating an item of food that is not Aldi's average, or even Tesco's finest, but actually an item of food at the very pinnacle of its class. Ethically and locally sourced, organically produced, made individually by hand with love and no preservatives, all the kinds of phrases that students tend to avoid like the plague when food shopping.

What I am in fact eating, is a chocolate lollipop. It's glossy and sexy and smooth and it looks seductively up at me from its fancy cellophane wrapping. The reason I have it is because, as a treat to myself, I went to the York Chocolate Story to celebrate the end of my exams. And a treat it certainly was.

The tour began with the charismatic guide transporting us back to the Mayan times, all the way through to early 20th century York. At its peak, there were 14000 people employed by the various chocolate families who set up here and, being Quakers, pioneered such innovations as the pension scheme and free healthcare for their workers.

The factories thrived during the war, and we are told of the singing production lines to keep the work interesting. "Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag", among many others, kept the factory workers going through the monotonous work of the making, polishing and packing truffles, chocolates, and Terry's Chocolate Apples. Yes that's right. The apple came first. Say what?

Before making my very own chocolate lollipop, now sadly reduced to telltale crumbs on my desk, we were taught how to taste chocolate. Not a hard task, I wouldn't have said, but there is an art, some would even say a science, which includes the sound, taste, smell and appearance, of the chocolate. At the end of the day, it's still chocolate, and I'm not going to complain, like the little girl also in my tour group, that I'm not allowed to eat it yet. I can wait, happy in anticipation, for it to melt in my mouth.

Later, I met Andrew Thwaite, head chocolatier at the attraction. A Yorkshireman, born and bred in the Dales, he has had an illustrious 25 years in chocolate before joining the York Chocolate Story, and plenty of stories to tell from it. We sit in the café downstairs, I with my hot chocolate, and he with a mug of Yorkshire tea permanently cupped in his hand, for a chat.

He was originally spotted by the biggest chocolate company in the world, Barry Callebaut, after doing a one day chocolate course whilst being a pastry chef, and loving it. "I actually blew an insurance policy and bought £7000 worth of equipment and set up in my garage at home, with just that one day's experience.

"I was really fortunate to do a massive amount of training with them which honestly you couldn't pay for. They have a number of chocolate academies throughout the world and the facilities they have are amazing. I did about three months in France, a couple of months in Belgium and a bit in Switzerland as well.

"For chocolate work in France in general, it's not a profession; it's a way of life. The French take it to a different level." Being head chocolatier in the York Chocolate Story also means that he is given a virtually free rein to do what he likes. "I get paid to stand upstairs and talk to people about something that I love, and I get to play with chocolate all day. It's fabulous."

What I find the most fascinating thing to learn throughout my day, is the huge variety of chocolate that can be found. As Andrew says, "people think of chocolate as milk, dark and white, but nobody really realises how many different types of chocolate there are; thousands and thousands." The sample we had on my tour was Ghanaian, and we almost strayed into the inner depths of wine tasting in our descriptions. The Ghanaian cocoa bean, for example, has a smokier taste than most chocolate, with undertones of peat. I need to exercise my taste buds more, clearly.

I ask Andrew about his most outrageous commission in chocolate, and he tells me about a 21st birthday present he was tasked with creating for a member of the Cambridge rowing team. "I did a life-size rowing scull like the Oxford and Cambridge boat race ones. His mother wanted it for his 21st birthday, and we filled it with 20,000 truffles. It involved taking about half a ton of chocolate to Cambridge, and lots of equipment, and making it on site."

No doubt there have been many less reputable commissions? "Oh yes. Hen parties, now that's another story."

Chocolate, as Andrew observes, holds a certain grip of fascination over people. "It's seen as a very seductive commodity, and there's still a lot of mystery surrounding it. At its Mayan and Aztec roots, it has always been very powerful, almost a religious artefact. There's such a lot people don't understand about chocolate, it still keeps its mystery." The York Chocolate Story briefly lifts the veil of chocolate for its visitors, and, being full of characters like Andrew, it's not one to miss out on.



2 comments

Zailuthfi

25 Dec '15 at 2:32 am

I've been loking for a post like this forever (and a day)

Report

Jenny Dunnett

24 Jan '18 at 3:07 pm

Hello

Harrogate Ladies Forum enjoyed a very interesting talk by Andrew this morning,

Thank you very much

[Report](#)

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