

The cocoa industry in T&T is blossoming, and the T&T Fine Cocoa Company (TTFCC) is one of many players that wants to contribute to the sector's expansion.

The company was awarded two Silver Awards' by the London-based Academy of Chocolate (AoC). The international awards were presented at a reception held on July 19, 2017 at the Claridges Hotel in London.

Located in the La Reunion Estate in Arima, the TTFCC has a total of nine employees and is considered to be a medium-sized company, with the capacity to produce 50 tonnes of chocolate per annum. The company gets its cocoa from farmers directly and does not go through intermediaries which means the farmers benefit from international prices for their cocoa.

According to a statement announcing the awards, "the first award was for the Tree to Bar category which recognised the TTFCC's specially formulated 70 per cent dark chocolate bar. This fine chocolate bar is produced with cocoa beans exclusively from the estate in T&T.

"The Silver Award was also presented to the TTFCC by the AoC in the category of packaging. The creative design of the Steel Pan Tin was acknowledged for its ingenuity. The association of the Steel Pan and T&T has been so strongly integrated that it engenders an internationally recognisable product by country of origin."

The Business Guardian spoke to Arvind Mahabirsingh, operations director; Vandana Persad, sales, marketing and administration assistant as well as Mary Ethel Gray, the chief chocolatier, last Friday at the TTFCC's factory at La Reunion Estate.

Speaking specifically about the cocoa sector, Mahabirsingh said the sector has the potential to generate greater revenues.

He said: "In our opinion, what must take place is higher value added processing and marketing of finished product, rather than raw material such as cocoa beans. We actually offer a service where farmers and other downstream processors can use our facilities to produce chocolate which they market under their own brand."

Currently, the company is looking at producing chocolate for diabetics. He noted that their products have always been health-based.

"We are very high in cocoa content which is the very healthy part of the chocolate. In addition, we also apply as minimal amount of heat as possible to ensure that the chocolate remains full of the same nutritional value as the bean.



T&T Fine Cocoa Company:

A global sensation

"That has augured well with the Diabetes Association of T&T since our product is fairly low sugared in comparison to the other commercial products out there."

TTFCC is also currently exploring the possibility of putting their products on the shelves of popular supermarkets and corner shops and added they were not daunted by competition. The company's products, Mahabirsingh said, were differentiated because the chocolate processing is different. TTFCC's presence in the UK is small but growing as the company has partnered with a chocolatier called Artisan du Chocolat where TTFCC's products are showcased in their seven stores.

Speaking about the Latin American mar-

TTFCC can be found at:

Stechers
CAL duty free store, Piarco
Diane's Tea Shop
Fernandex Wine & Spirits, Country Club
Happy Gourmet, Valpark
Jaffa, Oval

ket—including Central and South America—Mahabirsingh noted that those markets have their own cocoa heritage which means that selling chocolates into them would be a dif-

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ficult task. He compared this to the US and European markets which do not have a heritage of their own "so they are much more open to internationally branded chocolate.

"We have a cocoa library concept, which is a sample of cocoa countrywide. There are about 1,500 farmers nationwide, most of whom are inactive.

"Through our project with the Inter-American Development Bank known as the Impact Project—administered by the Cocoa Research Centre at UWI—we aim to improve standards of agronomy in the planting and growing of cocoa. We work with farmers from both Trinidad and Tobago. The idea is to develop a genetic sample library of all the farmers in T&T."

Asked whether the cocoa industry can be used as a form of generating employment for young people, Mahabirsingh said on the planting side of the cocoa industry there were requirements for field workers as well as a lot of potential for downstream processing to become larger.

As a result of the decline in T&T's economy due to falling oil and gas prices, Mahabirsingh said the government and other entities should look for alternative forms of income generation.

Referring to exportTT's role, he said they provided assistance in getting into the UK market under the Brand-TT marketing strategy.

TTFCC has been a part of trade shows and conferences such as the Intellectual Property conference which was recently concluded.

Persad added that such events provided wonderful networking opportunities.

Asked about the link between intellectual property and cocoa, Mahabirsingh said on the international market our cocoa is known.

"The experience has been that there are a number of chocolate companies that brand themselves as T&T original chocolates but are not 100 per cent T&T. What tends to happen is they would take T&T chocolate and blend it with bulk cocoa. Any chocolate company doing that would not be able to call their chocolate T&T chocolate," he said.

According to Mahabirsingh, once the standards are in place it would mean chocolate cannot be called T&T's chocolate unless it has a certain percentage of T&T cocoa in it.

The TTFCC has been working with the Ministry of Agriculture, the Cocoa Development Company, and the Cocoa Research Centre at UWI to develop their collective vision for the local cocoa industry.