JUST HOW “SLAVE FREE” IS TONY’S CHOCOLONELY?

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ILLUSTRATION BY VALERIE TRUCCHIA

By Miranda Purves

Grocery shopping at the age of 51 with a family of four to feed is mostly a grind now, but I still get one frisson of rebellious adult joy from the aisles when I chuck not one, not two, but five or six Tony’s Chocolonely bars into my cart at a time. With the Coop price of $3.75 per 6.35 ounce bar, it’s an affordable splurge. (At my nearest bodega that stocks them, Food Train on 7th Avenue and 11th street, they’re $5.95 each.)

I grew up in the ’70s with a mother who, when it came to candy, subscribed to a scarcity angle of parental modeling. Although my brother and I are sugar fiends, as are our parents, dessert was often yogurt and homemade jam. When there was chocolate, there was one bar. My mother controlled it, divvying it up agonizingly, with more for her and my dad.

Now, I have a 16-year-old and a 12-year-old who have their father's fast metabolism, and I'm in charge of chocolate procurement. I stock sufficient quantities each week to, I hope, allow my offspring to grow up free from a survivalist urge to fork their dining companion's hand to the table whenever a chocolate bar appears.

Tony's Chocolonely is particularly well-suited for fostering a sense of abundance, because it comes in 3-by-6-by-½-inch slabs that are wrapped in childlike primary colors, emanating an unrefined, bulk-buy quality.

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Flavors such as honey nougat, caramel or hazelnut taste like very, very good low-end chocolate. Good enough to lure in even bean-to-bar 75 percent plus cocoa aesthetes, such as my friend and fellow Coop member Jon Bines, who recently started buying Chocolonely milk chocolate bars for his teenagers.

"My enthusiasm is for the most delicious version of whatever the thing is. I have no problem with a slider or a corn dog. I just want it to be a good slider or a good corn dog," said Bines. "So if you want a fantastic, big thick chocolate bar, you want that one and not some crummy thing from Hershey's like a Chunky bar."

His wife, Alexandra Jacobs, mused that "expensive dark chocolate can taste like you're eating dirt."

Our families aren't alone in our yearning for a certain base indulgence. According to one of our chocolate buyers, Gillian Chi, Tony's Chocolonely is a Coop favorite, selling about 300 bars a week. Tony's Milk Caramel Sea Salt is our store's fourth most popular bar, just behind Justin's chocolate peanut butter cups and two Chocolove flavors

(whose popularity might be aided by their mid-shelf placement; Tony's is down at the bottom).

The emblem stamped on every Chocolonely bar, "Together we'll make chocolate 100% slave free," adds to the appeal for conscientious Coop members. I chose to view it as a final seal of approval for my weekly stockpiling, even though my 16-year-old cautioned that there is no such thing as slave-free chocolate. There were some truths, particularly during the pandemic, I didn't want to hear.

But researching this story has forced me to confront the veracity of Tony's appealing marketing message. Were they really different from other multinational chocolate companies?

Yes, Tony's proclaims—vigorously—in their social media campaigns, branding efforts, and their fair-trade stamp and B-Corp certification. (A B Corp, or benefit corporation, is a nonprofit that encourages what is known as "impact businesses," which balances profits with social and environmental stewardship.)

Not really, according to Ayn Riggs, a one-woman chocolate social justice powerhouse who turned her tiny NGO, Slave Free Chocolate, into an industry influencer. Since 2007, Riggs has issued an annual list of ethical chocolate companies as a way for consumers in the United States to be activists with their dollars. (Riggs said she works on Slave Free Chocolate pro bono; her day job is running a decorative arts company that specializes in Italian plaster finishes.)

In 2021, Riggs took Tony's off her list because their beans are processed into cocoa liquor by Barry Callebaut, a member of what she terms "the chocolate cartel," which also includes a handful of mega-players such as Mondelēz International, Cargill, Nestlé, Mars, Olam Group, and Hershey's. These multinationals dominate the market with exports from farms in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, which grow about 70 percent of the world's cocoa. The use of unpaid child labor on their farms is well-documented by, among other groups, the U.S. Department of Labor.

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Commodities trading and multinational corporations have kept the price of cocoa low for decades, despite increasing demand as Asian countries have begun consuming more chocolate and as dark bars have gained a reputation as a superfood in the West.

Because farmers, who tend to own only a few hectares and earn about $0.75 a day in Côte d'Ivoire and $2 a day in Ghana, can't afford to pay for harvesters, they turn to their children. Instead of going to school, these underage, unpaid laborers spend their days cutting pods off trees with machetes and hauling 100-pound sacks. The plantations are often soaked in Roundup, accidents are common and emergency medical care is rare or nonexistent. This is what the United Nations has defined as modern slavery.

In some instances, the children aren't relatives: They're boys from the even poorer neighboring countries Mali and Burkina Faso, lured with the promise that they'll be able to send money home but are instead enslaved and kept locked in sheds at night.

Initially, Tony's entire raison d'être was to change this system. In the early 2000s, a Dutch investigative journalist named Teun van de Keuken produced a television show on the chocolate industry. He was so appalled by the exploitation inherent in the supply chain that he and two colleagues eventually decided to start their own company. Their mission was to raise awareness, put pressure on the major players to change their practices, and procure slave-free beans from the poorest regions for their own chocolate.

They called the bars Tony's, after the anglicization of Teun's first name, and Chocolonely because the entrepreneurs stood alone against the companies who upheld

the slavery status quo.

The bars are divided unequally. This is to signify the inequality at the heart of the supply chain, but it has the side effect of making you eat more chocolate.

“There’s this round piece you have to work around and you can only get too small or too big a chunk,” said Luca Bines, Jon and Alexandra’s 16-year-old, “so you always go too big.”

Van de Keuken’s bars, which successfully conveyed both a social justice mission and a sense of zany Dutch fun, were an instant success. Since its inception in 2005, the company has grown vastly. They grabbed an 8.9 percent market share in the Netherlands in 2021 and have expanded, with influxes of venture capital and private equity, across the globe. They have opened offices in the United States, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Belgium, Germany and Austria. In 2021 they took in 100 million euros in revenue, although they reported operating at a slight net loss due to aggressive international growth strategies.

But as Tony’s has expanded, so has the problem they set out to stop. “When I first started my list,” said Riggs, “1.8 million children were considered at risk according to the [U.S.] Department of Labor. Now it’s gone up to 2.5 million.”

Both Chocolonely and Riggs agree that the multibillion-dollar multinationals are the ones causing the problem, and are also the only ones who can fix it, by collectively assuming the responsibility to pay living wage rates for cocoa and taking a hit in their profits and/or increasing the prices consumers pay.

Not only does the low price of cocoa force farmers to use child labor, it has also, in as little as a decade, led to an 80 percent destruction of rainforest canopy in Côte d’Ivoire’s once biodiverse national forests as farmers extend plantations to increase their low-dollar yields.

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Riggs acknowledged that many of the high-end bean-to-bar chocolatiers on her list are slave-free and sustainable by default. "They buy from more regulated countries such as Costa Rica or Indonesia, where the farmers are poor, but their children can go to school in the day and get medical attention," Riggs said.

She cites Divine Chocolate, also carried by the Coop, as an example of a Fairtrade company that is creating alternative economic systems, such as women-owned plantations, within West Africa.

"Tony's is great marketing, and has raised awareness, but results are results. After 16 years, I think it's BS that this is changing the industry from within," said Riggs. "And they're complicit in slavery by buying from Callebaut."

Tony's responded via email, admitting the failure to achieve industry-wide change but also asserting: "Have we made lots of impact on the ground at coops we work with, raised a ton of awareness and gotten other companies to join in on the cause? Heck yeah!" (Their email maintains the brand's high-energy tone.)

They say they pay both a fair-trade increase, which still doesn't bring the price per ton up to a living wage, and their own self-imposed premium, which they state does provide the 8,000 farmers in their network "a living income," enough to send their children to school.

Riggs questions whether tracking this is possible within the mélange of small, ramshackle farms dispersed in the forest. Indeed, in February, Tony's tweeted that

they'd identified 1,701 cases of illegal child labor in their supply chain in 2021, which they plan to remediate. They write that this "generally come[s] from onboarding new coops." Riggs casts doubt on how they can monitor that remediation when the farmers, even with increased fees for their crops, are still entrenched in poverty. "Transparency shouldn't provide much comfort to consumers," said Riggs. "It's a tool, but it doesn't fix a broken price structure."

If Coop members decided to view Tony's claims as social-good washing and wanted to stop carrying the brand, Chi, our buyer, explains that we'd have to bring it up as an item at the General Meeting.

For now, I'll continue to buy Tony's. I think it's preferable to keep some pressure on in the cocoa-growing regions of West Africa, to use marketing films to introduce consumers to the farmers behind-the-scenes, and to expand the number of farmers benefiting from somewhat higher wages.

I've come to see though, even as I munch down another smooth, thick wedge of caramel sea salt, that my mother's adherence to a model of scarcity was the more honorable parenting move.

Miranda Purves is a South Slope writer and tree hugger.