



CHANTAL COADY IN HER KITCHEN, PHOTOGRAPHED BY ROB GREIG

Bean COUNTER

Chantal Coady is a big name in chocolate. Absolutely meets her to discuss her newest venture

By **PENDLE HARTE**



Chantal Coady is the only person ever to be awarded an OBE for services to chocolate making. Which arguably makes her London's foremost chocolate expert, though she doesn't seem like someone keen to big herself up that way. Coady is best known as the woman behind Rococo chocolates, which pretty much revolutionised London's chocolate scene from its Kings Road boutique when it launched in 1983.

Back then Coady was a designer and illustrator – not a chocolatier – and her signature drawings and style became as much a part of Rococo as its chocolate. Rococo sold chocolate pebbles, chocolate olives and countless pretty shapes and glazes in beautiful boxes, and built up a mini empire with its own chocolate school and a thriving wholesale business as well as its own shops.

But Coady's no longer involved in it. A new investor and a series of changes, some of them Brexit-related, led to the business falling into administration, and Coady finally losing her part in it in 2019. The business still exists, and it keeps her illustrations and designs, but entirely without her. It's a sensitive subject and clearly one that has caused a lot of upset. She says: 'Losing Rococo in the way I did after all those years was devastating. It was heartbreaking and deeply stressful. It took me to the brink, both emotionally and financially, and getting over it has been a long, painful process.'

“When Quentin Blake heard her story, he was moved to create a drawing for her”

But we're not here to dwell on the past. I have come to Coady's house in Vauxhall to talk about her new venture, which is another chocolate business, but not like Rococo. The new brand, The Chocolate Detective, is another visually strong idea, but this time it's not led by her own drawings. When the eminent Quentin Blake, a friend of a friend, heard the story of Coady's split from Rococo, he was moved to create a drawing for her as a gift, and his vision of a lady chocolate detective complete with magnifying glass and hair in a bun has become her logo, coupled with an old-school typewriter font, which she thought was quite detectivey, in a Philip Marlowe way. Coady knows a lot about chocolate, and while she did go back to making chocolate a bit in lockdown, that's not her focus here. The chocolate detective is dedicated to uncovering the world's best chocolate and curating a collection.

“I've always been about the flavours,” says Coady. “I was the first person to combine chocolate and sea salt, which happened by accident when I was with my son on a beach in Cornwall, eating chocolate with saltwater



on my lips. I noticed that the flavours worked well together – and nobody had done that before.” The Chocolate Detective sells a range of ‘broken chocolate’ in Coady's recipes, including an intriguing white chocolate with wild fennel and cardamom (it's delicious, and a world away from overly sweet white chocolate thanks to its aniseedy flavour and subtle cardamom notes). Chocolate, says Coady, is like wine, and can improve with age – this is something we'll be hearing more about, she thinks. ‘Chocolate's flavour depends on the weather and the soil, just like wine, or coffee.’

Sustainability is at the heart of Coady's project, and she's dedicated to working with chocolate that's made where it's farmed. A long-standing relationship with The Grenada Chocolate Company is one of her big passions, and she has an aim to help the company build a new eco factory in Grenada,



co-operative negotiated to buy their homes from Lambeth Council; Coady is one of the few remaining residents who were there from the start. “All the tropical plants are left over from when there were a lot of Australians and New Zealanders looking after the garden,” she says, showing me the impressive view from her roof terrace. Her bright kitchen - the site of much chocolate experimentation over the past 40 years - is on the top floor of the tall, narrow house, and it’s a bright, inviting space. I notice a sofa upholstered in Rococo’s signature print. On the table are small bowls of chocolate, and the community cafe across the road stocks The Chocolate Detective.

‘I feel like I’ve had a hard reset in my life, but I am through the worst and making chocolate again has proved to be wonderfully healing. I am ready for the new phase in my chocolate journey and feel very positive about the future,’ says Coady. And so she should: her chocolate is excellent. Who wouldn’t want to receive a box of lovebird eggs for Valentine’s Day? Order yours now. 🐣

“The chocolate detective is dedicated to uncovering the world’s best chocolate and curating a collection”

and spread awareness of the importance of buying chocolate that’s actually produced in the place where it’s grown, keeping the profits with the farmers. Often beans are exported and the chocolate is made elsewhere, but the groundbreaking Grenada Chocolate Company pioneered an organic and sustainable bean to bar model that Coady would ideally like to see replicated all over the cocoa-growing world.

She’s very unassuming about it, but her quiet venture has been a success from the start, even in lockdown. In March 2021 she brought out a range of chocolate birds’ eggs for Easter, sold in actual quail egg boxes with songbird illustrations by Madeleine Floyd. They sold out at Belgravia farmers’ market as well as online, even though she had to post all orders out herself, with help from her family. And when Annalisa Barbieri wrote about them in the Observer - even though they’d arrived with her after Easter - so many orders flooded in “that we had a second Easter,” says Coady.

I came here to discuss chocolate, but I’m also interested in Coady’s house. Today,

Bonnington Square is a lush oasis of banana plants and neighbourhood gardeners, a legacy of its past. But in the 1980s the Victorian houses were derelict and marked for demolition. Coady was one of a group of determined squatters who moved into the condemned houses and fought against the developers, restoring the buildings themselves. Eventually they were able to lease the buildings collectively, and more than a decade later, the members of the housing



Chocolate Detective Valentine’s Pop Up

TUESDAY
8 FEBRUARY
12-5PM

•

WEDNESDAY
9 FEBRUARY
12-5PM

•

THURSDAY
10 FEBRUARY
10-8PM
(DRINKS AFTER 5PM)

OR BY APPOINTMENT
RACHEL VOSPER,
69 KINNERTON STREET, SW1

chocolatedetective.co.uk