

# The sweet taste of success

As a teenager, Amarachi Clarke overcame huge hurdles to follow her passion for football. Now, she's applying the same determination to her bean-to-bar chocolate business. By Rosie Mullender

**W**hen Amarachi Clarke set out to be one of a handful of bean-to-bar chocolate makers in the UK, she faced a wave of criticism for her alternative approach.

"Chocolate has historically been made with white refined sugar," says Clarke, 38. "I decided I was going to shake things up, and started using coconut sugar and lucuma – a superfood fruit – as a sweetener instead."

The result was Lucocoa, started in the bedroom of her flat, and now a successful craft chocolate-making business with a factory and shop in Bermondsey, south-east London, and a website (lucocoachocolate.com) for online sales. Clarke's chocolate is made by hand from rare cocoa bean varieties from Haiti, Belize, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic, and promises an ethical supply chain.

"There was a small group of self-appointed bean-to-bar chocolate bastions [for whom] what I was doing was a big change," says Clarke. "Bloggers would write: 'Chocolate should be made with white sugar! Why this?' and I was excluded from events. It felt like I was going up against a brick wall, that I needed to ask permission just to work in that industry."

Clarke pressed on, and in the eight years since she had the spark of the idea to make her own style of chocolate, Lucocoa has won four Great Taste Awards, and is stocked in high-end retailers.

Clarke's beginnings weren't what you might expect for a chocolate maker: a political activist with a degree in computer science, she was working at a global aid organisation when she injured her foot running the 2014 San Francisco Women's Marathon.

"I was interested in healing in the most natural way possible, and had heard that chocolate had all these amazing properties," she says. However, after doing some digging into the best chocolate to buy, she discovered that unethical labour practices were sometimes involved with chocolate production.

"I decided that the best solution was to start my own chocolate business, and prove you can have a sustainable supply chain that's ethical, good quality, and shows exactly what chocolate should taste like."

Clarke experimented at home with various cocoa beans, learning the process of roasting them at different temperatures, grinding them, and winnowing the shells using the only tools she had to hand at the time. "I did a lot of experimenting, using a rolling pin to grind the beans and a hair

dryer for winnowing," she says. "My friends and family tried my early recipe, and I'm not sure they were all that impressed! But I was determined to teach myself how to make chocolate properly."

Clarke attributes the sense of drive and purpose that led to the birth of Lucocoa to a childhood spent fighting for her place on the football field.

"I've always loved football, and have played since I was five," she says. "But when I got older, things got really hard. Women's football was something you had to fight to make happen – even just to play in the school playground."

"At school, the only matches they allowed girls to play in were five-a-sides on fun days – I remember one time, we had to dress up as

**'Being a woman, playing football, it all gives you thicker skin'**

the Spice Girls just to get a game. On another occasion, I went with some male friends for a kickabout down the park, and we started playing with a group of boys. One of them clearly didn't want me there, and he attacked me on the pitch. I ended up in A&E, and I've still got the scar on my chin.

"Things only really changed when I got to university and played for Southam, the local team. It was incredible – for the first time, I was on a team where people were as passionate about football as I was. But being a woman, playing football, being where people don't want you to be: it all gives you thicker skin. It makes you want to see things through to the end."

"Football gave me the strength to persevere. When I turned my back on my critics, the business started to fly. I launched Lucocoa at a chocolate show, and when we sold out, I realised I might be on to something."

Clarke took a market stall on Brick Lane, east London, followed by a move to Forest Gate, where she converted an outbuilding into a chocolate factory and became a full-time chocolate maker. Finally, her growing business landed at Spa Terminus, a food production and retail site in Bermondsey.

"We opened our factory and shop in February 2020 – just before lockdown,"

says Clarke. "It turned out to be good for us, because food businesses were allowed to keep trading – we grew 400% during the pandemic. People weren't carrying cash, so the idea that you could just bring out your [smart]watch or card [to pay] was a lifesaver."

She continues to take payments online and via a connected terminal at her stall. "We take Visa and other digital payments, and we need that help. It's really important in terms of our success."

She adds that digital payments helped level the playing field when it came to being a stallholder competing with big businesses.

Now shops have reopened, the small businesses of Spa Terminus continue to look out for each other to help the area thrive.

"My neighbours are a jam factory, a butcher, and a granola factory," says Clarke. "The businesses here buy from and support each other, too. The granola company will take some of our leftover chocolate to make limited-edition granola, while our binman takes our discarded cocoa bean shells for his allotment, giving us vegetables in return. It's a great community."

Although Clarke had to fight to win her place among the UK's chocolate makers with her alternative approach, her determination has helped her emerge with her ethics intact, and business booming.

"Playing football taught me that you should always do the thing you love. There will always be people around who don't want you to do a thing, or have a lot to say about what you're doing."

"But then you keep going and eventually think: 'Well I've just run past you, haven't I?'"

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Amarachi Clarke at Lucocoa's chocolate factory in Bermondsey, London: 'Playing football taught me that you should always do the thing you love'

