



# THE *Dignity* OF *Chocolate*

STORY BY EAGRANIE YUH • PHOTOS BY DANIKA MCDOWELL

**T**HIS WAS SUPPOSED TO BE A STORY ABOUT CHOCOLATE—specifically, an unlikely chocolate shop in the Downtown Eastside. It was supposed to be about where chocolate comes from (it grows on trees), how it is made from cacao beans (through many complex steps requiring chemistry, physics, and a bit of alchemy), and how it becomes confections and truffles.

I soon learned that this story has everything and nothing to do with chocolate.



I first met Shelley Bolton in the fall of 2012. Shelley's the director of social enterprise for the **Portland Hotel Society** (PHS), which runs several single-resident-occupancy hotels in the Downtown Eastside. Shelley's job is to start businesses—more precisely, social enterprises. PHS operates a few, including a thrift shop called Community, and an art and sewing shop called The Window. These social enterprises provide training and work for people with barriers to employment.

Over coffees at **Nelson the Seagull**, Shelley shared her plan to open a chocolate shop and coffee roastery next door at 319 Carrall Street. And not just any chocolate shop: one that would source its own beans and turn them into chocolate, often called bean-to-bar chocolate. The shop would use the chocolate in confections and drinks. Shelley and I met through a mutual friend—one Nat Bletter, co-founder of Madre Chocolate in Hawaii. Madre Chocolate is one of the companies that comprise the bean-to-bar chocolate movement

in the United States. Since 2008, I've been connecting with these small-scale chocolate makers to help share their stories. The more I've learned about their work, the more I've realized that it's a labour of love, and often of heartbreak. I've learned that making chocolate is expensive and risky, and that it's hard to make good chocolate.

What I hadn't yet learned is that where Shelley goes, magic follows. Leading up to the shop's opening in April 2013, Shelley hired eight women, collectively called "the ladies." Since **East Van Roasters** is on the ground level of the Rainier Hotel, it's fitting that the ladies, at least initially, were residents of the Rainier.

Shelley also recruited Merri Schwartz—former pastry chef at **C Restaurant** and **Quattro**, and founder of **Growing Chefs!**—to teach the ladies how to make bars and bonbons. Merri was skeptical. Could culinary novices really create fine, polished products? But the class went well, one thing led to another, and Merri agreed to be the shop's head chocolatier.

Photos: Danika McDowell, danikasea.com



Sheree & Shelley



East Van Roasters gets its cacao beans directly from farmers. The beans, which arrive astringent and ghostly in enormous burlap sacks, are coaxed into their burnished, full-flavoured selves when roasted. From there they are destined to be ground into a paste, mixed with sugar, and refined into smooth, luxurious dark chocolate. There's just one problem: the cacao beans are trapped inside a papery husk, which must be removed in a process called winnowing. Larger chocolate makers have winnowing machines; East Van Roasters has the ladies.

So on a bright, brisk day this past January, I join two of the ladies in the shop's back room. One of them, Sheree, agrees to be in this story. Her nails painted like fire engines, she shows me how to gently press each bean between my fingers. The husk falls away to reveal a perfectly shiny bean, which she deposits in a small bowl.

Over the rattle of beans and husks, we talk. Sheree lives on the third floor of the Rainier Hotel with Charlie, her three-legged cat. She describes herself as happy, healthy, and healthy-minded. She likes

to write, and one of her stories—about robbing a bank twenty-ish years ago, only to get caught jaywalking afterwards—was published in an anthology.

Back then she was using heroin. She's been homeless, including a stint living in Stanley Park, and has been hospitalized a number of times. "I was really not taking care of myself properly ... I'm bipolar ... I was completely delusional and using street drugs, and not able to make good choices for myself." She looks at me, her bright eyes framed by a touch of mascara.

"Shelley's got great vision. [When] she told me she was going to open a chocolate shop, I couldn't vision it down here ... Sure enough, here we are."

And here Sheree is. "There's three different types [of beans] we do—Peru, Dominican Republic, and Madagascar," she says. The Madagascar, which we've been winnowing, is the easiest. She grabs a few beans (she calls them nuts) from a bucket behind her. "Here's a



Shelley Bolton

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At Christmas, Sheree wrapped the finished chocolate bars in gold foil. “It’s like origami from hell when you first start, right.”

Raven, another one of the ladies, started working one day a week, and now works five. “I like the cleanup at the end of the day,” she says over the hum of the dishwasher. “It’s not my dream career by any means, but it keeps my mind stable.”

It’s not just the ladies who are finding their way. After working for more than a decade in kitchens where tough love rules, Merri has found joy in a new way to work. “The restaurant industry is just so harsh,” she says as she lines heart-shaped molds with chocolate. “I’d come to believe that was the way to get best results, the way to train people. I had to retrain myself to approach problems with a whole different attitude, a different level of compassion.”

Meanwhile, Shelley is nursing a batch of chocolate. Today she’s making chocolate, but we’ve both learned that her job is much more than that. She’s part counsellor, part wellness advisor, part negotiator. And while she may be the boss, she doesn’t rule with power.

“If people don’t feel respected and aren’t given the ability to heal themselves, no matter what you try to teach them, they won’t trust themselves to do the work,” she says. “They need to feel that they are needed and a part of something bigger than themselves, and I think that’s what we give people here.”

All this time, a question has been tickling the edges of my brain. It finally crystallizes: of all the businesses to start, why this one? The answer is remarkably practical, yet philosophical. Because it’s so labour-intensive, making bean-to-bar chocolate means more jobs. But more than that, says Shelley, “there’s beauty in taking a raw product and creating something that’s really refined and considered high quality.”

For a moment, I have to remind myself that we’re talking about chocolate.

**East Van Roasters. 319 Carrall Street, Vancouver. 604-629-7562 [eastvanroasters.com](http://eastvanroasters.com)**

*Eagranie Yuh will never look at chocolate the same way again. [thewelltemperedchocolatier.com](http://thewelltemperedchocolatier.com)*

*Photographer and stylist Danika McDowell enjoys exploring healthy, sustainable food systems while strengthening her connection to the people who grow her family’s groceries. Visit her blog [TheEatisOn.com](http://TheEatisOn.com) and her portfolio [danikasea.com](http://danikasea.com)*

Dominican nut. You need to cut it along the seam, along the side,” she says, demonstrating with her bird’s-beak paring knife. “You can see it’s a lot more work, right?”

I mimic her technique as best as I can, then pop the liberated bean into my mouth. It tastes of freshly pressed olive oil and a grassy field on a spring day. Sheree inspects the bowl of Madagascan beans in front of us, picking one in particular and placing it in my palm. I taste it. It’s bright, fruity, citrusy. “See the difference? Tasty, right.” When she says “right,” it’s half question, half statement.

Sheree has come a long way since moving into the Rainier five years ago. “I have my family back in my life, and that’s not something I thought would be possible again ... Now that I’ve gotten older I can see how painful it must have been to see someone who’s so hell-bent on destroying themselves, whether it’s deliberate or not.”

I ask what East Van Roasters means to her. “It’s great to have some income coming in, and I leave here and I feel good about myself ... I feel like a productive person. And even though what we’re doing [winnowing] ... you could look at this as menial, but it’s the most important part of it, right. Without the nuts, there’s no chocolate.” We keep on winnowing. “It was my birthday yesterday,” she says. “I turned 45 yesterday.”

Winnowing is one of the biggest jobs at East Van Roasters, but it’s not the only one. As we work, one of the ladies runs the front cash.