

DEPARTURES



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Sweet Barcelona

The city that introduced cacao to Europe is once again at the forefront of the xocolata avant-garde.

BY MARCIA DESANCTIS

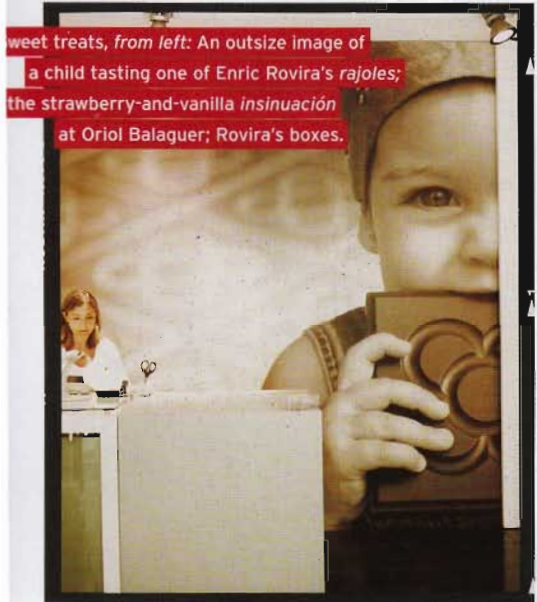
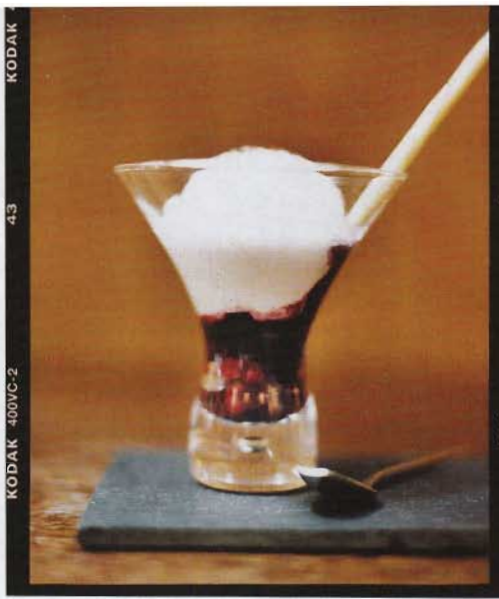
Cacao Sampaka's take on cocoa

Five hundred years ago, when Christopher Columbus sailed into the port of Barcelona with a few sacks of cacao beans, Europeans had never seen or tasted anything quite like them. A drink made of the crushed beans, sugar, and spices became a favorite of the Spanish court, and two centuries later all of Europe had surrendered to the pleasures of chocolate mania.

For a while Spain was a major producer, opening one of the world's first facilities for transforming liquid chocolate into solid. But by the 19th century, countries such as Switzerland,

Belgium, England, and Holland had surpassed it with more sophisticated technologies and, ultimately, better distribution to the rest of the world. Spanish chocolate-making carried on, small and artisanal, but its reputation and international profile languished for almost two centuries.

These days Spain is again emerging as an innovator in the industry it created, coinciding with its ascendancy in architecture, design, and gastronomy. With new airports, bridges, and museums that have put formerly forgotten cities like Bilbao on the world map, the nation is managing to preserve the past while updating



sweet treats, from left: An outsize image of a child tasting one of Enric Rovira's *rajoles*; the strawberry-and-vanilla *insinuación* at Oriol Balaguer; Rovira's boxes.

it in surprising ways. And it's Barcelona, once again, that is the undisputed *xocolata* hub. Indeed, some of the city's chicest new boutiques are chocolate emporiums, their owners determined to get the international recognition that eluded their predecessors.

XOCHOA

This expanding chain of space-age boutiques—think 1966 Courrèges meets New Age minimalism—was at the forefront of Spanish chocolate's new wave. The company was started in 1994 by Marc and Miquel Escursell, grandsons of old-time pâtissiers. Marc was working in marketing and design while his brother Miquel, a chocolatier who trained in Vienna and Paris, was running the family pastry shop. The brothers' desire to reinvent the family

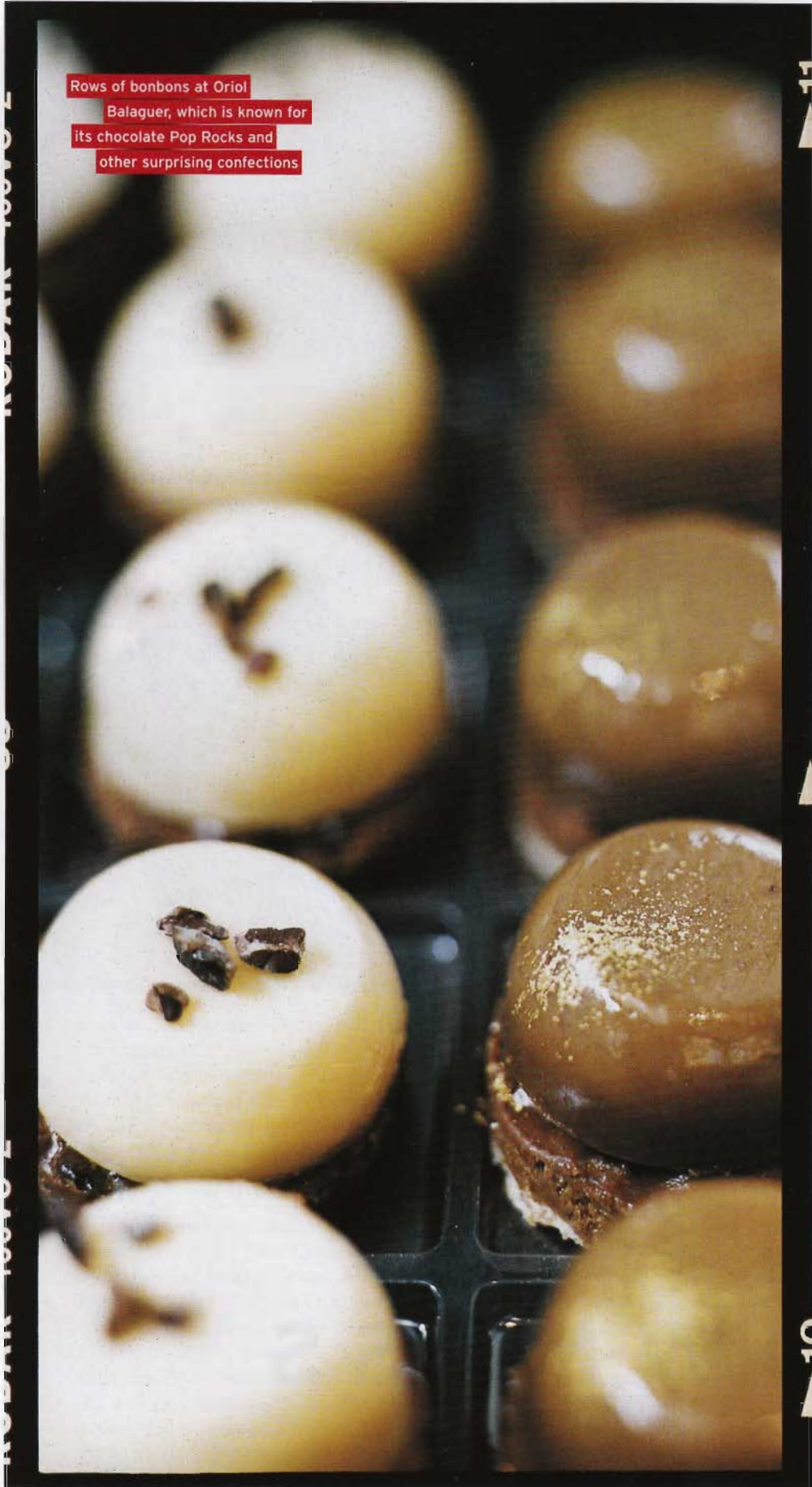
business was motivated in part by Catalonia's emergence as an art and design center. "Miquel decided to test out new flavors, to do something different and trendy, and I created the wrappers and the corporate logo. It was too simple," says Marc, "but nobody in Spain had done it before."

They set up shop in the city's old-town Gòtic district and hired Pablo Juncadella and Marc Català, two young designers, to revamp the packaging, interiors, and window displays. The design plays on Barcelona's Technicolor wit: Stark white walls are lined with chocolate bars wrapped in Gaudiesque colors, creating the effect of a mural splashed across the store.

Now an empire of 13 shops, Xocola sells decadent delights from dark bars laced with gold leaf to cocoa-flavored beer. One

of the more memorable flavors is the lemon verbena-infused Maria Luisa, enveloped in frilly lavender paper. An unusual soft green color, the chocolate is at once bitter, sweet, and slightly citrusy. The ginger bar, wrapped in Mediterranean blues, offers a crisp surprise when the ginger flavor emerges from behind the creamy dark chocolate and lingers on the palate.

Much as when the Catalan chocolate industrialist Antoni Amatller commissioned two iconic illustrators of the Art Nouveau movement, Alphonse Mucha and Penagos Zelabardo, to create advertisements for his products, Xocola has just enlisted Barcelona art world superstar Jordi Labanda to design its new packaging. At 11–13 Petritxol; 34-93/301-1197; xocola-bcn.com (available in the U.S.A. at svtea.com). **CONTINUED »**



Rows of bonbons at Oriol Balaquer, which is known for its chocolate Pop Rocks and other surprising confections

CACAO SAMPAKA

Begun in 2000 by Albert Adrià, the brother of superstar chef Ferran Adrià of El Bulli, Cacao Sampaka was conceived as an antidote to the age of twee chocolate shops run by stern ladies in white gloves. Award-winning designer Antoni Arola used woods that reflect the spectrum of chocolate hues, from blond slatted walls to dark-toned display shelves. Rows of chocolates sit under glass like so many jewels in a vitrine. Customers fill bags, penny candy-style, from bins groaning with chocolate-covered hot peppers and toasted corn—the latter is twice as creamy and addictive as its poor cousin the Raisinet—or savor cups of hot cocoa infused with passion fruit.

Cacao Sampaka's bonbons are arranged by theme: "Flowers, herbs, and herbal teas," "Wines, liquors, and spirits," "Cocoas and spices of the Americas." There are some merely dazzling flavors (lavender and curry) and then mind-blowing ones (Parmesan cheese, anchovy, and Modena vinegar). The chocolatiers, Ramon Morató and Quim Capdevila, seek out the finest raw materials, including La Joya (The Jewel), a rare white criollo cocoa bean from a plantation in the Mexican state of Tabasco. La Joya's range of flavors boggles the imagination: The first vaguely floral hint gives way to fruity tones of citrus and prunes and finishes on a strong chocolate note. Soon Cacao Sampaka will start using the beans—from another Mexican plantation, Soconusco—first offered to the Spanish crown in the 16th century. And the selection of chocolates categorized by country of origin (say, Ecuador or Venezuela) pays homage to the global range of the cocoa bean. *At 292 Calle Consell de Cent; 34-93/272-0833; cacaoampaka.com.*

ENRIC ROVIRA

At the ripe old age of 36, Enric Rovira is a grand master of chocolate. Part alchemist, part artist, this son of Barcelona pastrymakers struck out on his own in 1993, collaborating with some of Catalonia's leading artists—sculptor Andreu Alfaro and furniture designers Emili Padrós and Ana Mir, for starters—on the Artist collection.

In the Barcelona shop (Rovira's only other outlet is in the nearby town of Castellbell i el Vilar), yellow, blue, and green



boxes are stacked neatly on white shelves. Chic and minimal, the boutique emphasizes order and discretion. Inside the tidy packages, an inspired melding of contemporary style and old-world quality is on brilliant display. His flavors range from the surprises in his *bombola* confections—violets, pink pepper, and salty, satisfying pork cracklings procured from a small town near his factory—to more traditional offerings, such as his iconic collection of chocolate *rajoles* (“tiles” in Catalan), each of which represents one of Barcelona’s unique paving stones. Rovira even does a futuristic series of “virtual” chocolates: bonbons that contain the aroma of a particular flavor, meant to be sniffed but not ingested. At 113 Josep Tarradellas; 34-93/419-2547; enricrovira.com (available in the U.S.A. at alegio.com).



Chocolate chic, clockwise from top left: Xocoo’s sleek interior; El Paradigma and floating cocoa beans at Oriol Balaguer; Xocoo’s Marc Escursell; inside Cacao Sampaka; Balaguer’s pizza-inspired cake.

ORIO L BALAGUER

Also the son of a confectioner, pastry chef Oriol Balaguer is an individualist with his sights set on the world. “My philosophy,” he says, “is always to go farther.” Balaguer worked with Ferran Adrià at El Bulli for seven years and now produces some of Barcelona’s most daring confections that he sells from a sleek and spartan shop. All glass and white with clean angles, the boutique has a central display case holding space-age pod-shaped chocolates. With ganache fillings that include rose truffle, wasabi, and saffron, they are carefully presented as specimens of the master’s work.

Balaguer imports his cocoa beans from Central America, Tanzania, and Indonesia and prefers bitter chocolate that lingers in the mouth. One creation is especially rich: a dark-chocolate shell filled with an olive oil-laced white-chocolate ganache. Eating it is like tasting the essence of Catalonian culinary purity. His best-selling chocolate-covered Pop Rocks, which he calls *masclatàs*, a combination of creamy and crunchy, sour and sweet, literally explode in the mouth. When asked about his recipe, Balaguer divulges that they are made by dipping Pop Rocks in cocoa butter and mixing in hazelnut praline before he stops himself, saying “The rest is a professional secret.” At 2 Pl. Sant Gregori Taumaturg; 34-93/201-1846; oriolbalaguer.com (available in the U.S.A. at casaoliver.com).

