

# A teaching “hexxperience”

Las Vegas chocolate makers emphasize story behind cocoa beans, production process.

By Alyse Thompson // ASSOCIATE EDITOR

**W**ith temperatures often surpassing 120 degrees, the Mojave Desert may not seem like the best place to set up a bean-to-bar chocolate operation.

But, with hopes of creating something unique in a city known for serving up thrills, chefs Matthew Piekarski and Matthew Silverman took that challenge head on. In 2015, the friends opened Hexx Chocolate & Confexxions, as well as Hexx Restaurant & Bar, at Paris Las Vegas.

In addition to serving customers in an 8,000-sq.-ft. fine dining area, Piekarski, Silverman and their team produce small-batch, single-origin chocolate in an 1,100-sq.-ft. kitchen. Hexx also sells its “confexxions” in an on-site retail store and offers tours and free chocolate tastings.

The goal, Piekarski says, is to open customers to the chocolate-making process while entertaining them.

“It’s an educational piece, but it’s something that brings value for people,” Piekarski says. “They can come, relax in the air conditioning, taste some great chocolate and they can bring that story back to their families.”

Hexx has many stories to tell. Named for the hexagonal shapes on Hexx’s bar, Piekarski and Silverman added another “x” to reflect the Roman numeral notation for



20. Why 20? Because cocoa grows 20 degrees north and south of the equator, Piekarski says. (Hexx’s logo also has a degree symbol above the second x.)

When customers visit Hexx, they’re taught about the first — and one of the most important — steps in chocolate making: sourcing. Hexx purchases beans from farms in Ecuador, Madagascar, Peru, Tanzania, Venezuela, and most recently, from the Oko Caribe co-op in the Dominican Republic. Piekarski said he and Silverman appreciate the care the Caribbean farmers give to the beans.

“There’s a lot of thought that goes into it, and they really seem to care about the end user,” he says. “They don’t want to send you an inferior quality product, because they understand what the expectation is.”

Piekarski says close relationships with farmers help Hexx to not only secure high-quality beans, but also provide a narrative they can pass on to customers.

In fact, Hexx’s connections allow the chocolate makers to have fresh cocoa pods shipped to Vegas, which they break open in front of customers.

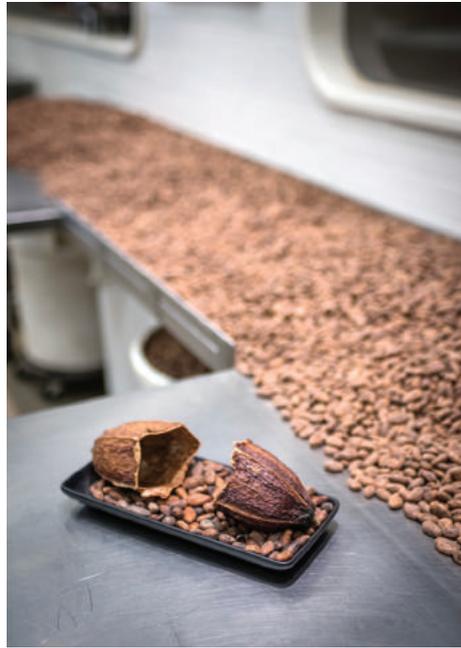
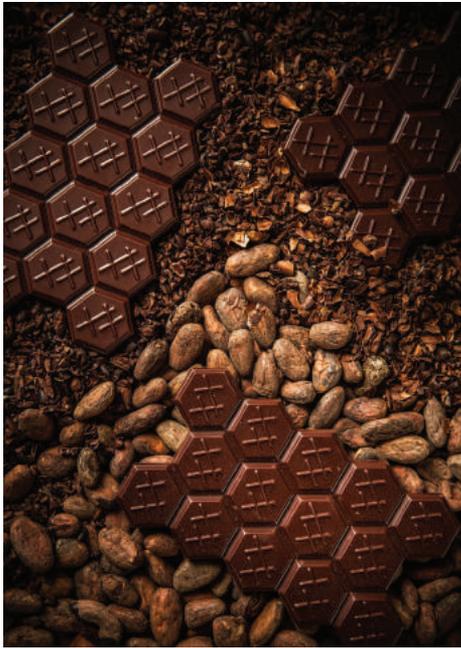
“We crack open fresh pods, let them smell the fruit, taste the fruit — it’s a completely different experience,” Piekarski says. “Building those relationships with people give you those opportunities that most other people don’t get.”

Customers try Hexx’s finished products at an eight-seat tasting counter, where they sample milk and dark chocolate from all origins, ranging from 47 to 74 percent cacao.

Piekarski noted Hexx’s ownership requested the chocolate makers create milk chocolate bars for those who may not enjoy dark chocolate. However, the dark bars outsell milk bars in Hexx’s retail shop and at wholesale locations.

Piekarski attributes that to attention to detail — both in the manufacturing process and the chocolate’s story.

“This is a dark chocolate that’s been given a lot of attention,” he says. “It’s sorted so we get the best beans. We’re roasting it correctly, we’re grinding and



**Hexx Chocolate, a bean-to-bar operation in Las Vegas, sources cocoa from Ecuador, Madagascar, Peru, Tanzania, Venezuela and the Dominican Republic. Hexx chocolate makers process beans and make chocolate in a 1,100-sq.-ft. kitchen.**

conching it correctly to accentuate all those flavors that are within the bean.”

Hexx uses a variety of methods to illustrate the complexity of chocolate. The chocolate makers host wine, whiskey and beer pairings and use chocolate and cocoa nibs in their menu selections. Piekarski pointed to Hexx’s banana muffins and bread, in which they swap out nuts for “versatile” cocoa nibs.

“It adds that layer of crunch, but when you grill that banana bread, it gives this smoky, savory component to it, and that sweetness kind of disappears,” he said. “You get that crunch, a little bit of bitterness, that smoky flavor, and you get that sweet syrup that brings it all together.”

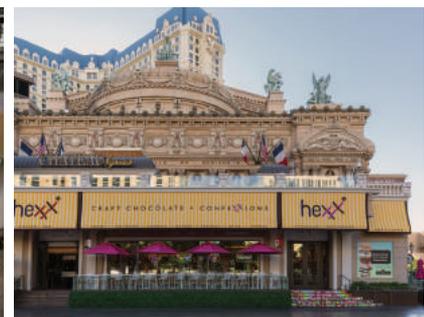
While Hexx is going strong at Paris Las Vegas, Piekarski said he and Silverman hope to grow Hexx’s wholesale and online business. He added that the company’s online shop has proved to be an asset for customers who want to take home Hexx chocolate but don’t want it to melt while they’re walking the Strip.

But Piekarski hopes they take away more than just high-quality chocolate.

“They enjoy seeing it. It’s the flow of chocolate. It’s the smell. It’s the grinding, it’s the noise,” he says. “People enjoy seeing the process from start to finish.” 



**Matthew Silverman, chef and head chocolate maker, left, and Matthew Piekarski, executive chef and chocolate maker, opened Hexx in 2015. The company’s name plays off the hexagon shape and the latitudinal regions where cocoa is grown.**



**At their Las Vegas operation, Hexx uses the compact SleekWrapper-40 (left) to automatically wrap as many as 100 chocolate pieces per minute.**