



Josef Zotter, the company's founder, at the Austrian Embassy wearing differently coloured shoes – emphasising his passion for unusual combinations

“I don't follow trends – I start them!”

At a lavish press event held at the Austrian Embassy on March 7, Josef Zotter – founder of Zotter Chocolate – explained his company's roots, its bean-to-bar credentials, his innovation philosophy and more. Simon Rowley reports

Zotter Chocolate, an Austrian chocolatier founded in 1987, has developed a strong reputation over the last 30 years – partly due to its innovative range of chocolate products and bean-to-bar credentials, but primarily thanks to Josef Zotter, the man behind the scenes that is responsible for the company's growth and success.

A trained chef from an early age, Josef founded the Zotter family business alongside his wife, Ulrike, and today he oversees everything that goes on at the company; with a particularly strong hand in new product development. Thanks to his efforts, Zotter was recently named among the top 25 chocolate companies in the world (by chocolate tester Georg Bernardini in his illustrious 2015 publication, *Chocolate – The Reference Standards*), and additionally, Josef himself received an entrepreneurial award last year too.

But how does the company actually

function, and what does Josef actually oversee on a day-to-day basis? In the extravagant surroundings of the Austrian Embassy in London last month, the Zotter head honcho made a rare visit to the UK to tell all.

Master of innovation

In a packed room filled with journalists and other culinary luminaries, Josef started by examining Zotter's current product assortment – which is a revolving range made up of 365 chocolate bars, one for every day of the year. The majority of these are quirky combinations, such as the British-themed Lemon Curd & Orange and the (distinctly less British) Pink Coconut & Fish Marshmallow, and between 40 and 60 new varieties are introduced each year (with the same quantity being removed).

Speaking on how he manages to develop 60 new innovations every single

year, Josef notes, “It really only takes one minute for one innovation. I can taste the flavour combinations in my mouth before I even begin making the product. We then make the flavour and the packaging, and it's ready”.

Josef made it clear that the chocolates that are removed from the product line aren't inferior sellers, by any means, but that he simply keeps in his favourite varieties. Expanding on this, he explained that confectioners have a tendency to produce items that the market wants, but Josef makes a point of producing the things *he* wants. Zotter only produces its chocolates in small batches, meaning there is no guarantee that they will continue to produce any specific bar – mainly because Josef loves new varieties and a constant flow of new products. “I want to improve things all the time, rather than making one core product and replicating it in mass quantities until the end of time”,

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he notes. “But you also have to give the market a chance to like it”.

Perhaps surprisingly, he often removes the best-selling products from sale, but only to make space for the lower sellers – because he wants people to sample these less popular varieties to gauge their response.

A cemetery of ideas

Some varieties, however, do not quite make the cut. For instance, the ill-fated Runner Bean with Red Wine Onion chocolate did not succeed because it was found that the mixture continues to develop even after the product is finished! To commemorate those that don't succeed, Zotter has a cemetery park at its factory where each failed concept is given a tombstone, flowers and a small light. As of 2016, there are currently 1,000 ideas buried there.

Another concept – also now in the ground – is Artificial Fertiliser Chocolate. This product came about after Josef had offered some edible fertiliser, but decided that whilst he liked the idea, he didn't like the taste. So as a solution, he set about creating his own ‘artificial fertiliser’ using super foods. While the chocolate was indeed edible, it didn't quite make the cut, and is now in the cemetery alongside many other concepts.

Tellingly, all flavours of the mainstay products have been slightly modified over the years, and nothing is exactly the same as it was on the day it was first launched. Once Josef decides that he wants recipe changes, however significant, he makes the improvements straight away, without waiting for a board meeting or any formal discussions.

Unusual focus: insects and blood

At the event in early March, Zotter put on a chocolate tasting of many of its creations, including very dark origin chocolates, colourful fruit bars and other chocolate ideas such as insect shots, Liquorice de Luxe and Firewood with White Fir. However, also handed out to attendees were new Chocoshot products, novel plastic ‘syringes’ containing liquid chocolate. Following a tasting, many in attendance were surprised to learn of one its key ingredients – insects.

Josef comments, “I experiment, and every year I have a focus. This year,

it is wood that has been toasted and charred; but last year, it was insects. We consider insects to be the nutrition of the future, and sports people are already using them. They are far more advantageous than meats like beef or chicken, and offer a shelf life of four months.”

The insects, which Zotter sources from a certified supplier, are used as an ingredient for one of the Chocoshot flavours.

As you will already have sensed, Zotter is no stranger to unusual ingredients. Two varieties in recent memory continue to cause controversy, namely: blood (made with pigs blood), and hemp (which is legal and tastes fine, but considered a drug).

Bean-To-Bar and other credentials

In 2007, Zotter successfully took steps to expand its manufacture to bean-to-bar production, and today invests €18 million (£14.1m) to process chocolate directly from the cocoa bean onwards. The fairly traded organic cocoa is purchased directly, roasted, grounded, milled and conched, and Josef Zotter is now one of the few independent bean-to-bar producers in Europe, and the only one to produce solely in organic and fair-trade quality.

Its bean-to-bar concept sees 30 different co-operatives producing the chocolate, most of which are from South America (Josef's favourite chocolate

country happens to be Peru). Once the cocoa beans arrive at Zotter HQ, they are selected, peeled and milled. The cocoa mass then turns to liquid, and then they add the milk and so on.

Customisable chocolate

It was revealed that the chocolate that sells the most is ‘100% choc’, which spells a trend of people wanting healthier confectionery that does not contain as much sugar – but it's also the most difficult to produce, according to Josef: “The more cocoa there is in the chocolate, the more difficult the workmanship is”.

In addition to its popular products, one of the more novel features on Zotter's website is a ‘chocolate builder’, which allows customers to create their own chocolate. A total of two billion different possibilities are achievable, and in the company's home country of Austria, the products are delivered the very next day in the majority of instances. When asked how this unique idea came about, Josef quipped, “It was easier than listening to feedback – people can now just create what they want themselves!”

Not resting on his laurels after a successful day at the Austrian Embassy, Josef continued his tour of the UK by speaking at Cambridge University the following day.

An extensive selection of Zotter's current chocolates were available to try on the day

