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RAISING THE BAR

Olly Richards meets the man who's going to change the way you eat chocolate...



COCOA RUNNERS

The question 'What sort of chocolate do you like?' will probably illicit a response along the lines of a) any I can lay my hands on, b) a specific bar with added caramel/nuts/whathaveyou, or c) I'm diabetic; please leave me alone.

Spencer Hyman, founder of Cocoa Runners, is trying to change the way people answer that query. He wants you to think about the taste of chocolate in the same way you think about the taste of wine or cheese. The company takes the world's best chocolate and delivers it to subscribers' doors, much like wine clubs, in fact.



'TO MAKE GREAT WINE YOU NEED GREAT GRAPES. THE SAME IS TRUE OF CHOCOLATE AND BEANS'



'Most people can tell you what kind of wine they like, but not many people can tell you that when it comes to chocolate they like a fruity Madagascan or a smoky Papua New

Guinea,' says Hyman. 'To make great wine you need great grapes. The same is true of chocolate and beans.

'Most beans are sold in bulk to big companies who want quantity over quality. Instead of wanting the chocolate to be an expression of the bean, in the way a good wine would be an expression of the grape, they want consistency for their product. They want a uniform taste.' Generally, he argues, we think of chocolate by brand names, without any idea where it actually came from.

What Hyman has spent years doing is finding small-batch chocolate producers from around the world who make chocolate with passion and produce bars that taste distinct according to the bean used or the area where they were created. He's tried over 500 different varieties of chocolate, the poor devil, gathered all the best together and formed the equivalent of a wine club, but with chocolate, sending out monthly packages to Cocoa Runners subscribers and taking them on a chocolate tour of the world. The site even gives you a personality test when you sign up to gauge what you might enjoy.

Tasting chocolate with Hyman is quite an eye-opener. When I sit down to meet him he has a great swathe of chocolate bars spread out before him, like Willy Wonka without the Oompa Loompas in tow. He gives me a smoky dark chocolate from Vietnam; a grainy, cinnamon-heavy disc from Mexico; 100 per cent cocoa chocolate that instantly dries out my mouth and is so deeply sharp it's almost lost the taste we think of as chocolate; one with a hit like barbecue sauce; and then something absolutely foul that tastes overwhelmingly of licorice and is apparently the biggest selling chocolate at Iceland's duty-free shops (they can keep it). Some are fruity, some are sweet, some are surprisingly spicy, but no one bar tastes like the next. It is eating

chocolate in a way I'd never previously considered, as a food with infinite varieties rather than something to be wolfed down when you're a bit low on energy.

'There's been a huge change in chocolate over the past few years because it's now much easier to set up a factory of your own,' says Hyman. 'It used to be that you'd have to mortgage your house to build a full-size factory but now you can set up something in a tiny room for about five grand. I'm finding new makers all the time.' And when the variety is this huge, surely it means trying as much as possible is educational; not gluttonous, right?



To sign up to Cocoa Runners visit cocoarunners.com



RIDE THE WAVE

Aqua spinning is the high-intensity, low-impact class making waves in London. Ellie Ross takes the plunge

I love cycling. And I really love swimming pools. But cycling in a swimming pool? It wasn't a combination I could see making a splash any time soon.

How wrong I was, I thought, as I rocked up to my first aqua spinning attempt at Dolphin Square Fitness Club in Pimlico.

Donning a swimming costume, I entered the pool area where ten bikes were lined up in the water. Nine of them were already taken.

So, odd combination or not, aqua spinning certainly seems to be a hit with those who know about it.

Also known as pool biking, this twist on the increasingly popular spinning class is said to be a low-impact, joint-friendly underwater alternative.

Due to the water density, it's also meant to be harder work, claiming to burn up to 800 calories in one 45-minute session - the equivalent of a Big Mac and fries.

Dorine Denjean, founder of Aquallure, first heard about aqua fit classes in her native France and claims it helped her lose two stone.

She brought the concept across the Channel, launching London's first pool biking classes in October 2013, aimed at everyone from injured athletes to yummy mummies.

'Pool biking is perfect for people with busy lifestyles,' she says. 'You get a good workout without getting your hair wet.'

'There are also huge benefits of exercising in water. It improves everything from joints to blood circulation and you don't get post-workout soreness.'

I was dubious. How could a workout that gives you no soreness the next day be any good?

But I took the plunge, slipping into the pool and onto the one remaining bike, which had just its handlebars breaking the surface.

The class was all-female. The only men in sight were swimming lengths in the lanes behind us, occasionally

pausing, wide-eyed, to see what the heck we were doing.

It was a strange sensation, feeling water brushing over my legs with each rotation, my feet attached to the pedals with a thick yellow strap.

But what if I fall off my bike, can't get my feet out and drown? Luckily my fears were laid to rest by a smiling lady on my right, who had been coming to the class for a year.

'It's worked wonders on strengthening my legs and overall toning,' she told me. 'It's hard - but fun. And I love the music.'

On cue, our cheerful Portuguese instructor, Hugo, pressed play on his stereo, Franz Ferdinand started blaring and my 45 minutes of pedalling furiously in water began.

We sat down. We stood up. We hung off the back of the saddle. Our legs went round slowly. Then fast. Then full flipping tilt.

Just like in a spin class, my legs were starting to feel the burn.

But the great thing was, because I was in the pool, whenever my boiling-hot face started stinging with sweat, I simply splashed it with some nice cooling water.

Then we stood up and pedalled with just one hand on the handlebars, then one finger.

Some of us (me) struggled with that, wobbling around and narrowly avoiding a rapid, face-first dismount into the drink.

'Use your core,' Hugo called from his poolside static bike, smiling at my feeble attempt. I squeezed my belly muscles and it seemed to do the trick.

Unlike regular spin classes, here we also worked our upper body. While pedalling, we swooshed our arms side to side, forwards and backwards in time to I Like To Move It.

Have you ever tried clapping your hands behind your back in water, while riding a bike? It's even harder than it sounds.

There were moments where I felt a bit peculiar — at one point we were waving an air lasso around over our heads to Gangnam Style. But it was fun.

At the end of the session, my red cheeks and slightly unsteady legs were all the proof I needed that my body had had a workout.

And the next day? I couldn't feel a thing.

Ellie took the plunge at aquaAllure. Visit aquallure.co.uk

50% OFF YOUR FIRST AQUALLURE CLASS AND 15% OFF COCOA RUNNERS

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