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# A Sustainable Commitment

From the planters in Madagascar who harvest the cocoa beans to the top chefs worldwide who use the high-grade chocolate in their recipes, Valrhona treats everyone in its production chain with value and professionalism.

Images by Jean Delmarty and Jérôme Bryon

In the small French town of Tain-l'Hermitage, a one-hour drive south of Lyon, Valrhona produces premium chocolate products that are used by some of the best chefs, artisans, providores, restaurateurs and chocolatiers across the globe. The luxury brand is passionate about working collaboratively with its people while ensuring its practices are ethical and sustainable.

Jean-Luc Grisot, CEO of Valrhona, has been with the business for 14 years and is highly familiar with all stages of the chocolate manufacturing process. He says his philosophy is, firstly, to always look after his employees to achieve success. "I think the big difference between one company and another

is the motivation and the commitment of their employees," he explains. "Our company is very committed and very passionate because we take the time to explain our vision to our staff and where we want to go. We have a lot of moments where we share the vision." One such moment is when production comes to a halt for one day each year in order for everyone in the Valrhona team to come together and listen, in detail, to what is currently happening within the business. They can then provide feedback and suggestions. "I think the true key of success is the commitment of the employees. I am extremely confident about our future because I have a lot of confidence in the employees of Valrhona, at all levels of the business."

In 2014, Valrhona was ranked number 11 in the Great Place to Work Institute's 'Best Workplaces in France' annual survey—an achievement Jean-Luc is very proud of. The business also ranked in the top 12 for the three consecutive years prior to that. "What is very interesting for me is that this vote is given by the people. I am very proud of that because we are in this ranking as just one of two companies who are organised in shifts, which means our staff are working during the night or during the weekend. We are compared to companies of the new world, of the digital or e-business world, while we are still in the old economy. So people love to work for Valrhona because of the interest we show and the fact that we share the same vision as our people." >

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Valrhona employs almost 700 staff and Jean-Luc's managerial style is based on collaboration and sharing. "We are working towards a new vision in terms of managing our employees. We have implemented a new initiative in the structure of shift work. Our employees are given the opportunity to choose how they want to work. The manager, of course, is there to help the team to choose the way they want to do business. They have goals, they understand the company's goals, and they organise themselves in their team. We began this new approach four years ago and it has resulted in fewer small shifts and more exchange between management and the employees."

Valrhona's number-one goal is to make the best chocolate in the

*"It fills us with pride to be one of Valrhona's preferred suppliers for equipment on which their outstanding products are produced and we appreciate the partnership with Valrhona—one of the leading brands in the chocolate industry." - Serge Entleitner, Managing Director - Business Area Consumer Foods, Bühler AG*

world for the best customers in the B2B markets such as chefs, chocolatiers, and providores. Jean-Luc says the company controls the entire chain of operations from "bean to bar" and credits that as its point of difference when compared to other chocolate makers around the world. Its high-quality aromatic beans are sourced from countries such as Madagascar and Venezuela where long-lasting relationships are developed with the planters. Various projects have been launched with the local communities to address issues such as living conditions, education, and health. Valrhona is committed to sustainable and profitable co-development and 100 per cent of its cocoa-bean suppliers have signed a responsible purchasing charter.

"Social responsibility is very important," Jean-Luc says. "We meet regularly with the planter and we have the ambition to make the best chocolate in the world."

The key success of making the best chocolate is to have the best and most aromatic cocoa beans. An example is in Madagascar, a country we have been involved with for 25 years now. We are not only concentrating on helping the planters to improve their skills but we are also playing a role in helping them to improve their lives. We help to build new houses for the families who work on the plantation, or create schools, or give them filters for pure water. It's very important for us to help the planters to increase their quality of life.

"Twenty-five years ago, we decided what was good for the communities, and today we work with them to help them to create whatever project they need. If they want to improve the quality of life, it's the way they choose. We pay a high price for the best quality with the cocoa and we help the planters because we want to have a long-term agreement with them. If they are happy, the

families are happy too, and the level of life is good for them, then we'll be sure to have a good guarantee of supply of these quality aromatic beans, creating thus a virtuous circle."

Two years ago, Valrhona started an annual initiative to invite 20 employees and 20 clients to a plantation. In 2013, the group travelled to the Dominican Republic to witness the opening of the Los Indios School which was financed by Valrhona as part of its partnership with the local growers. Then last year, a different group journeyed to Peru and followed the footsteps of the Gran Blanco cocoa bean. Valrhona has pledged that 200 employees, roughly a quarter of its staff, will be able to go on one of these trips by 2020. "This year, it will be in Madagascar," Jean-Luc says. "I think it's a very important moment of sharing. One key of our success is our ability to share values and the passion we have for chocolate. We share that passion with our customers because our customers are very passionate about chocolate. Our employees are passionate, and our planters are passionate. To share that one week every year between customers, employees, and planters is a good key to success. This type of thing doesn't exist in any other chocolate companies I know of but for us it's a very important moment because we are sharing our vision and we use it as an opportunity to see where the beginning of the chain is."

"The best chocolate begins with the best beans and to see the places where the beans are grown is very important for everyone. It's a great moment of sharing vision about the company and encouraging discussion. It makes sense for these customers to see the quality of relationships we have. They are very proud of the job we are doing at Valrhona and they are very happy about seeing the level of responsibility and the good level of relationships we have with our planters."

Valrhona has four chocolate schools—two in France, one in Japan, and one in the US—with 25

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pastry chefs. Each was opened to inspire chocolatiers, encourage innovation, and educate people about the chocolate industry. Some of the best chefs and gastronomy professionals in the world have been trained in these facilities. In 1989, the very first École du Grand Chocolat created by Frédéric Bau, was opened in France and 100 trainees were welcomed. Twenty-five years, and three more schools later, and the mission remains unchanged as it seeks to optimise the talents and skills of the artisans and chefs who study there. More than 10,000 clients from Europe, US, Japan, Korea, Mexico, and Canada have put their faith in the schools to receive advice and develop their skills.

Jean-Luc believes innovation is important to the success of Valrhona, and the École du Grand Chocolat in France plays a major role in this. It is a creative design hub and trend catalyst with a research and development department dedicated to answering the needs and wishes of artisans and restaurateurs. By developing a scientific

approach to raw materials and their use, listening, communicating, and sharing with professionals from diverse and rich cultures, the pastry chefs of the École du Grand Chocolat are committed to constantly creating new techniques, recipes, and concepts. "That is another key to our success," Jean-Luc states. "We completely understand the needs of our customers because of the fact we have employees in the same profession as our customers. It is very important to develop new applications and new tasty developments."

Opened in October 2013 in Tain l'Hermitage, the Valrhona Cité du Chocolat offers the general public and professionals a behind-the-scenes look at fine chocolate, where visitors are invited to explore, smell and taste chocolate in all of its forms.

Valrhona has been enjoying the sweet smell of success for a quarter of a century and will continue this positive trend as it focuses on crafting luxury chocolate of the highest quality for the world's top chefs and chocolatiers. •

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