

SHORT TAKES



Steve Wallace's Omanhene Chocolate is guilt-free, not only because it uses only slave-free cocoa beans from Ghana, but because the company's focus on dark and dark milk chocolate products has newly touted health benefits.

Chocolate with heart

From his home in Whitefish Bay and a \$9,000 loan from his life insurance policy, Steve Wallace started an international business to sell the best slave-free, guilt-free, politically correct chocolate in the world. He was among the first to forge an international business venture between the United States and the government of Ghana. The business is called Omanhene, an African Twi word meaning chief, the repository of ethical and moral authority.

The mission of the business is to process the cocoa grown by local family farmers into chocolate products for export, keeping both agricultural and manufacturing dollars in Ghana, and thereby helping to improve the lives of the people of Ghana. Until recently, all cocoa beans grown in Ghana were exported to other countries that produced the more profitable finished cocoa products such as chocolate. Wallace says if you take beans offshore, you're taking value offshore. He believes that private business and not charity is the most effective way to help the people of Ghana deal with economic hardships.

Omanhene was started in 1991 and has experienced 55 percent average annual growth during the past three years. It is a unique chocolate company in that its 300 factory workers are shareholders in the company. They also receive subsidized housing, free health care, meals and transportation. Economic opportunities have translated into an increase in disposable income and improved community infrastructures.

Here's more with Steve Wallace:

Q.: How did you get interested in starting a chocolate factory in Ghana?

A.: My interest in Ghana stems from my foreign exchange student experience in 1978 when I was 16. I lived with a Ghanaian family — Yao, the father, his three wives and 21 children. I loved Ghana and vowed I would help the people here when I grew up.

Q.: Why did you choose chocolate as your vehicle to help the people of Ghana?

A.: It hit me all at once. Chocolate bars. Why hadn't Ghana tried to develop chocolate bars to compete on the world market? Once I considered the idea of chocolate bars made in Ghana, I simply couldn't let go. Sure, Switzerland makes fine chocolate, but how many cocoa trees actually grow in Zurich? I was convinced that if Ghana can grow the finest cocoa in the world, then it should be able to produce the finest chocolate in the world.

Q.: How did you convince the Ghanaian government to work with you?

A.: I was a pain in the neck. I was sitting in the minister's office, a very formal looking British office. The receptionist asked me if I made an appointment. I said no because your phones weren't working. She said there were no appointments for four weeks. I explained I had a plane ticket back to the U.S. three weeks from now, and I have nothing to do meantime, so I will just sit and wait until I have an answer. The room got hot and the receptionist told the minister that there's a very pale-skinned person sitting in your office and he won't go away.

Q.: Where can you buy Omanhene Chocolate locally?

A.: Omanhene Chocolate products are sold through the company's Web site, www.omanhene.com, or by calling (800) 588-2462. In Milwaukee you can find the chocolate at Pick 'n Save, V. Richards Market, Outpost Natural Foods, Alterra Coffee Roasters and Sendik's Food Market.