

Doing business in the chocolate sector in Brussels

Market, trends and good practices

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Introduction



Chocolate! The mere mention of the word makes us salivate. It awakens our taste buds and evokes that dual sensation of smoothness and crunch.

Like our beer and chips, chocolate enjoys unparalleled popularity both within Belgium and beyond our borders. Of course, the status of chocolate is already firmly established in Belgium. Our country's close relationship with cocoa contributed to its rise, which took on new dimensions in the early twentieth century, with the appearance of the household names of Belgian chocolate, such as Côte d'Or, Neuhaus, Callebaut and Leonidas.

The history of the modern Belgian chocolate industry begins in 1912, with the invention of the praline by Jean Neuhaus. This famous chocolate-enrobed treat rapidly became the pride of our country. A few years later, the ubiquitous ballotin giftbox arrived, which protects the pralines while offering a choice of packaging options.

In addition to pralines, we cannot fail to mention the manon, a buttercream and praline confection, the candied orange rind orangette, or the simple chocolate bar, found throughout Brussels, but especially in Sablon, around the Grand-Place and the Royal Galleries of Saint-Hubert. The concentration of chocolatiers in the city centre is mainly a result of the tourist appeal of these areas, further enhanced by the renewed interest in gourmet products among consumers.

A refined product once known as "the food of the Gods", the chocolate industry is attracting an increasing number of hopefuls, who dream of turning their passion into a career. In Brussels, the number of chocolate-related businesses (manufacturers and retailers) increased by 21.1% between 2010 and 2017¹. In the same period, the number of people employed in the sector leapt by 23.4%. This appetite for the industry has also been replicated throughout the county: Belgium is home to the world's highest concentration of retail outlets and boutiques selling chocolates or chocolate products (Wagralim, 2016, p.8).

Looking beyond these figures, new trends and products are constantly emerging, in a quest to satisfy both the increasingly exacting demands of customers and the increasingly ambitious visions of the chocolatiers themselves. Today, *bean-to-bar*, organic and Fairtrade cacao, pink chocolate, raw chocolate, sleek packaging and even 3D printing are all part of the chocolate industry in Brussels.

Despite the difficult economic climate and a downward trend in everyday consumer spending, chocolate remains in high demand. It continues to be associated with "luxury" and indulgence.

Between 2014 and 2017, chocolate exports from Brussels increased by 28.8% (from 96.6 to 135.6 million EUR²), demonstrating a keen interest in one of our star products among foreign consumers. They also account for 33.9% of all food exports from the Brussels Region.

¹Source: Statbel

²Source: National Bank of Belgium

« Why this guide ? »

hub.brussels is the Brussels Business Support Agency. In order to do our job successfully, we must analyse the business ecosystem of Brussels and promote growth sectors and opportunities within the region.

The production of this guide is therefore in keeping with our commitment to promoting the Region and its businesses, while developing specialist knowledge of the economic ecosystem in Brussels and presenting it in a convenient and accessible manner. We hope you enjoy reading and using this guide.

Methodology



This guide is divided into three sections

Section one

The first section of this guide looks at the chocolate industry in the Brussels-Capital Region from a quantitative point of view.

The aim is to accurately diagnose the health of the sector on a nationwide level (production, consumption, household expenditure, etc.), focusing in particular on the Brussels-Capital Region. To this end, a field survey of the entire Brussels Region has been carried out, in order to determine the location of all chocolate retailers, as well as the districts with the highest concentration of chocolate shops.

What's more, section one presents an opportunity to assess the performance of the sector, observing the number of boutiques that have opened and closed in Brussels. It is also a chance to identify other stakeholders involved in the sector.

Finally, we will take a look at the scale and nature of chocolate exports from Brussels, in addition to the issues (human, ethical, societal) upstream in the chocolate supply chain.

Section two

Section two aims to provide an objective overview of the industry from the point of view of its stakeholders.

We decided to survey as many chocolatiers and retailers primarily selling chocolate products as possible. Representatives of federations were also interviewed in order to gather a broad range of viewpoints.

The latter were mainly selected on the basis of an interview with Géry Brusselmans of Tartine et Boterham³ and the Choprabisco federation membership list.

Finally, fifteen⁴ were interviewed, offering us their perspective on recent changes in the industry, emerging trends and evolving consumer habits.

The Agency also hired Egérie Research to lead a consumer focus group. Because while artisans create the product, they must still win the hearts of customers.

With this in mind, eight people (four men and four women), aged 24 to 62, were interviewed. The first phase involved preliminary interaction (via Facebook, mobile and online contact) and lasted one week.

The second phase involved a three hour discussion among a representative focus group (managers, self-employed workers, retirees, jobseekers, etc.), all of whom lived in Brussels.

³ Tartine et Boterham is a listings site for artisan bakeries and patisseries in Brussels.

⁴ Laurent Gerbaud, Bjorn Becker (Mike & Becky), Géry Brusselmans (Tartine et Boterham), Guy Gallet (Choprabisco), Johan Domas-Conzemius and Raphael de Macar (Guérin-Boutron), Vanessa Renard, Philippe de Selliers (Leonidas), Valérie Goossens (who owns several Neuhaus franchises), Pierre Ledent, Antoine Corné (Corné Dynastie), Frédéric Blondeel, Pierre Marcolini, Philippe Lafont (Pure Chocoa) and Jean-Philippe Darcis.

What are they looking for? What emotions do they seek? What encourages them to buy chocolate? From early childhood memories to an eagerness to please, we attempt to decode the feelings that Belgian chocolate generates among its consumers.

Section three

The third and final section offers an overview of the journey to becoming a chocolatier in the Brussels-Capital Region.

In addition to the necessary technical, scientific and creative skills of the trade, entrepreneurs must be aware of several key factors in order to successfully launch their business.

Therefore, we at hub.brussels believe it is necessary to summarise the various stages in founding a business: the courses on offer, the various regulations (for example planning permission, environmental and AFSCA (Food Safety) permits, etc.), and the support available for startups.

This section also offers aspiring entrepreneurs a wealth of information on the formalities to be completed before opening a business in Brussels.

The second part focuses on factors to take into account in order to grow your chocolate business. These include the use of social media and e-commerce, as well as identifying new trends in the sector (such as *bean-to-bar*).

Indeed, while there are a growing number of chocolatiers in Brussels and some people are even speaking of market saturation, the sector is ripe with opportunities. This is particularly true of the overseas market, with demand from consumers worldwide continuing to rise. Belgian manufacturers are well aware of this: a growing number are beginning to export, particularly to the Asian market.

1. State of the sector



The chocolate sector brings together businesses involved in the manufacture, trade and sale of chocolate or chocolate-related services. Until recently, the cacao supply chain was dominated almost exclusively by four major players. **Growers** sell their beans (directly or via cooperatives) to **major processing businesses**⁵, who roast and grind them, in order to produce a semi-finished product (couverture chocolate). This is then purchased by **chocolatiers** (both household names and small independents), who use it to create their products, which they then sell to the **consumers** (via their own shops or through supermarkets) (Bellantonio, Higonnet, Hurowitz, 2017, p13).

In recent years, some chocolatiers have moved away from using these intermediaries. By doing so, they take control of all stages of the manufacturing process, buying directly from local growers. This approach is known as *bean-to-bar*.

This study essentially focuses on the two final links in the chain, the chocolatier and the consumer.

1.1. Regional dynamics

As we have already mentioned, one of the purposes of hub.brussels is to develop specific knowledge of the business ecosystem in Brussels. With this in mind, the aim of this section is to characterise, in as much detail as possible, the chocolate sector in Brussels.

Naturally, before founding a business of any type, it is essential to gain an overview of the market as a whole. Location within the region, performance of the various stakeholders, competitiveness on the international stage and flagship districts are all key elements in understanding the sector.

But while the Brussels-Capital Region is our field of expertise, we must not forget that the chocolate is anchored in a commercial reality that extends far beyond regional borders. Over the years, our chocolate has come to be enjoyed worldwide. From Tokyo to Paris, via New York and Brussels, chocolate consumption has grown considerably. Due to the scale of demand, global cacao production and processing has more than doubled since 1980.

Nearer to home, **Europe stands out as the largest market in the world at 47 billion dollars** (of a total of 98.3 billion dollars worldwide) (Wagralim, 2016, p.1). According to l’Echo (cited by Walagrim, 2016, p.1), this figure is set to increase by 5% in terms of volume and 7% in terms of value by 2020.

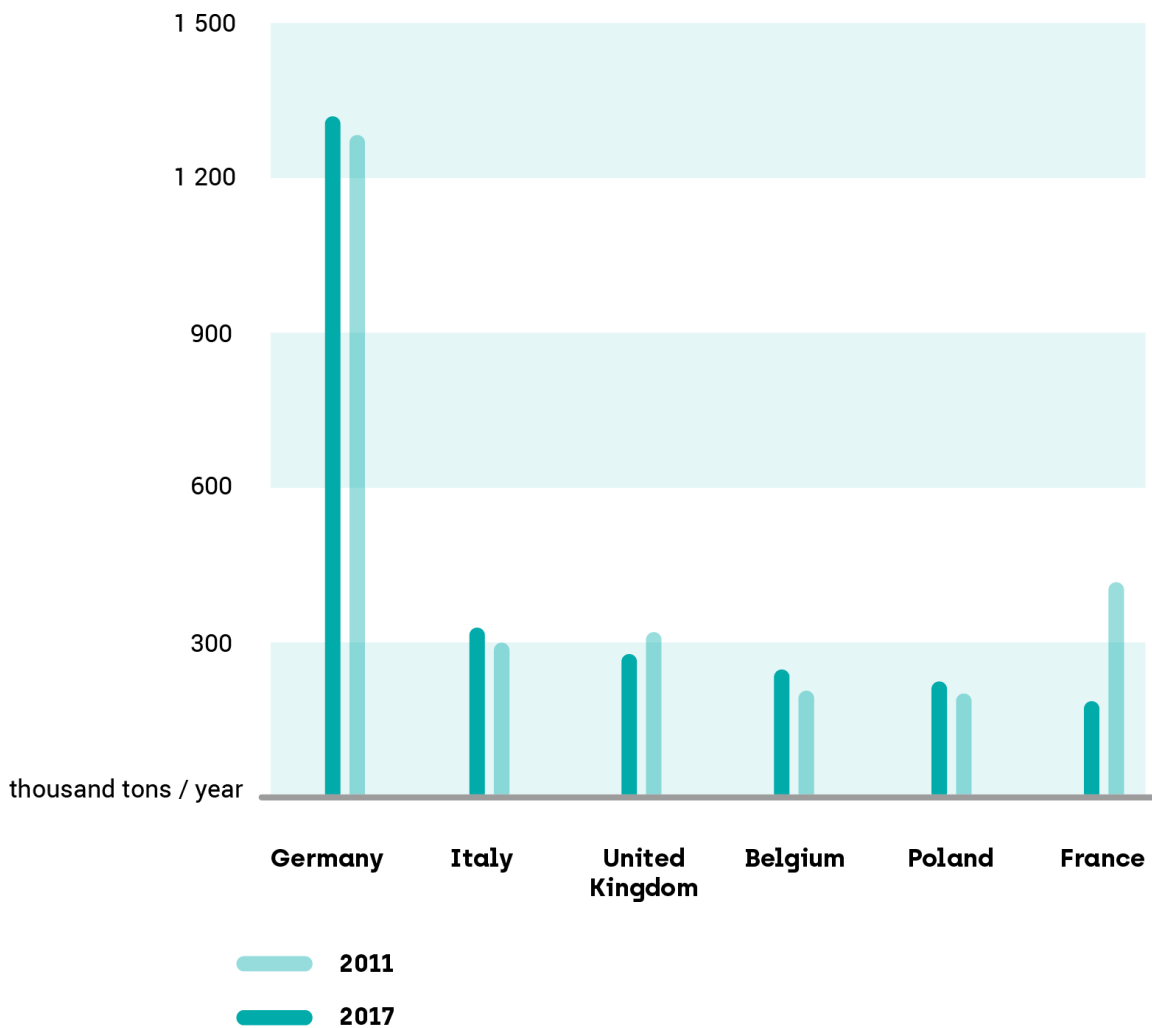
⁵The largest are the French-Belgian-Swiss company Barry-Callebaut and American companies Gargill, ADM-Cocoa (ADM standing for Archer Daniels Midland) and Blommer. Between the four, they purchase over 45% of all beans produced worldwide (Barel, 2017).

In Belgium

Known as the land of chocolate, Belgium unsurprisingly occupies a dominant position within Europe. The market is thought to be worth 4.8 billion euros and production in the country has continued to increase over recent years, reaching **248,100 tonnes in 2017**. This is compared to 205,420 tonnes produced in 2011 (Coabisco, 2019, p44). It has therefore risen by 20.8% in just five years! This makes our country the fourth largest producer in Europe (see Figure1)⁶.

FIGURE 1

Top 6 European producers (2011-2017)

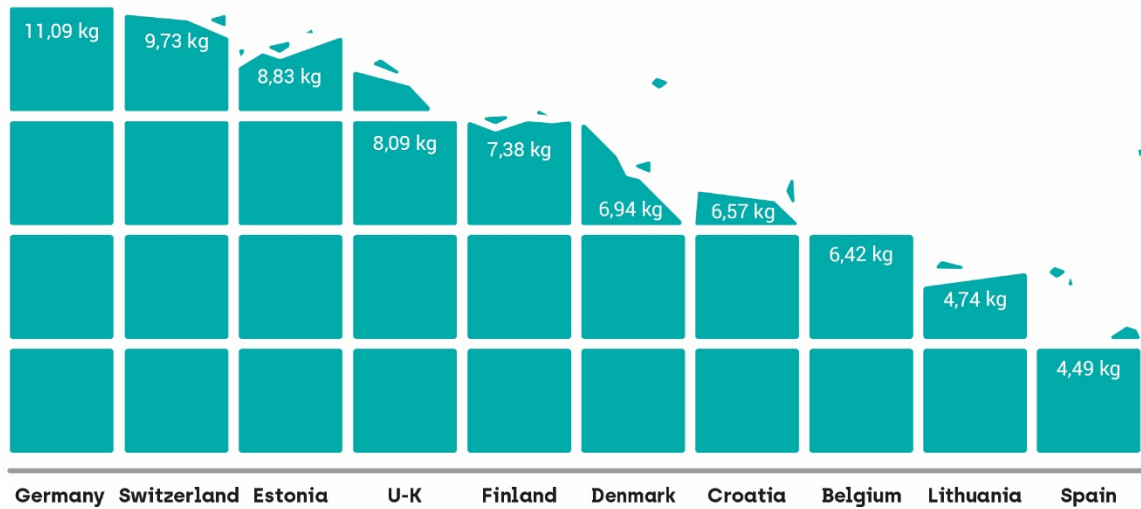


Source: Figures provided by national associations

⁶However, these figures do not account for couverture chocolate. Yet Belgium is a champion in this field. This means that actual chocolate production would be closer to 800,000 tonnes.

FIGURE 2

Chocolate consumption per capita



Source: Figures provided by national associations

Unsurprisingly, Belgians are also major consumers of chocolate (see Figure 2). While they do not match the impressive performance of certain European countries, Belgians devour 6.42 kg of chocolate per year (average per capita in 2017) (Coabisco, 2019, p48). More precisely, according to a survey carried out by research bureau InSites Consulting⁷ (2018, p3 ;6), 91% of Belgians eat chocolate at least once a month and 73% always have chocolate at home. This is even more true of those aged over 55 (80%).

In terms of expenditure, according to a study of household budgets carried out by FPS Economy in 2016, the average Belgian household spent 138 euros on chocolate. By contrast, they “only” spend 33 euros on products in the “jam, marmalade and honey” category, and 54 euros on “sweets, chewing gum and confectionary”.

A sign, if one was needed, that Belgians still have an appetite for cocoa-based treats.

⁷Survey commissioned by the Côte d’or brand (Mondelez). 1002 people were interviewed as part of this survey, carried out in March 2018.

In the Brussels-Capital Region

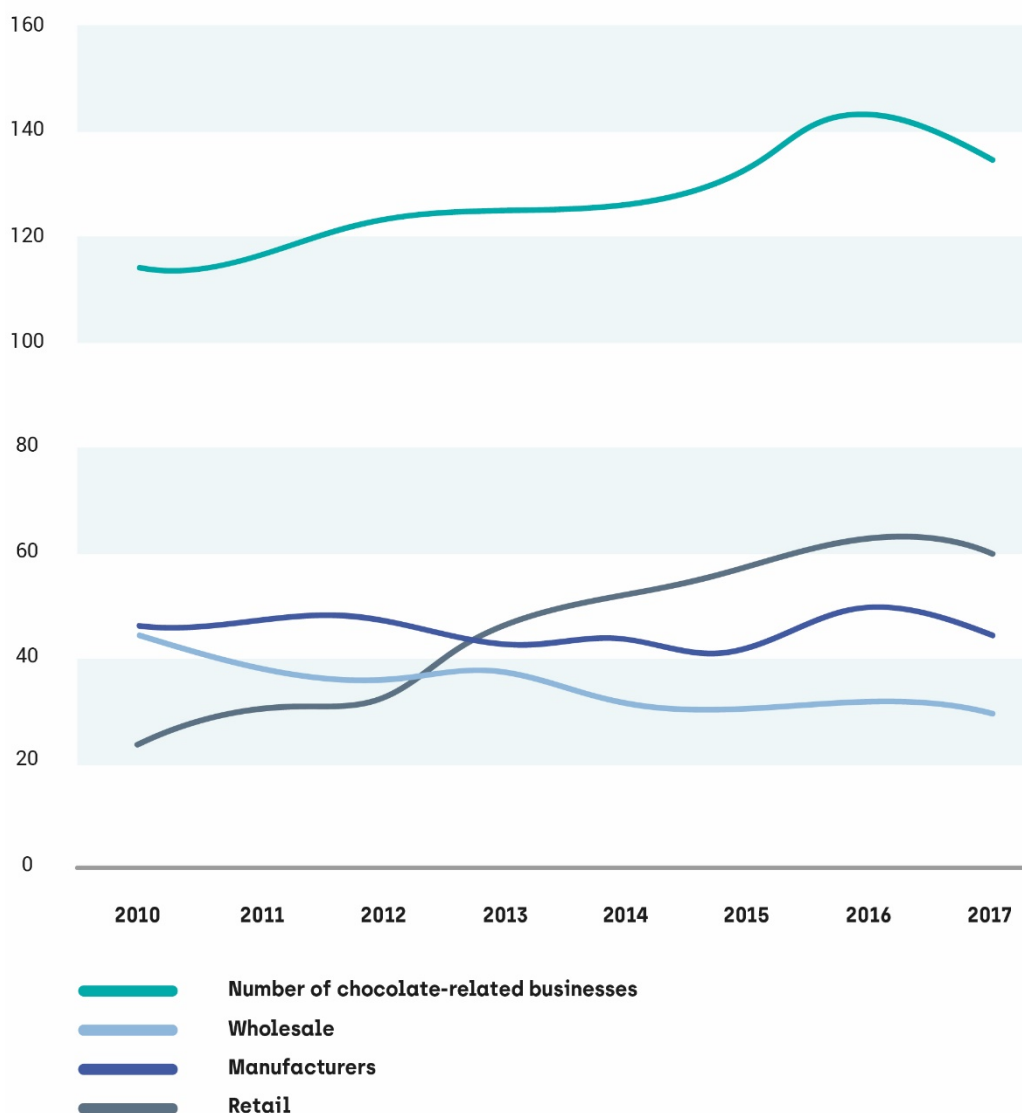
In terms of businesses and jobs, the sector has experienced strong growth in recent years, indicating general good health and an enduring appetite for chocolate.

A growing number of businesses

The number of chocolate-related businesses has continued to grow since 2010⁸, both in terms of manufacturers and retailers (see Figure 3). Between 2010 and 2017, their numbers rose from 114 to 138 in Brussels, an increase of 21.1%. There was, however, a slight decrease between 2016 and 2017, with numbers falling from 146 to 138. Retail trade has experienced the greatest increase.

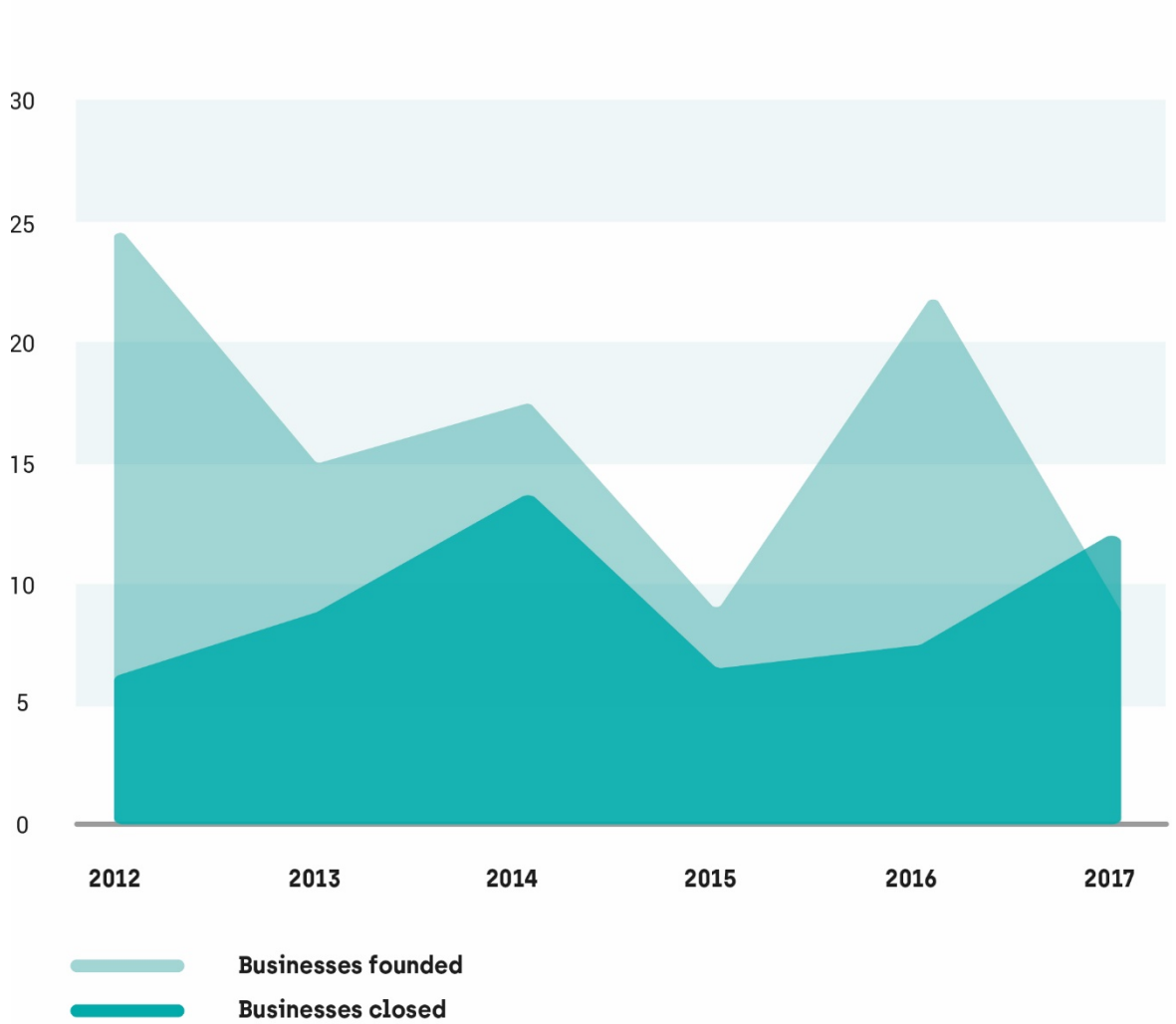
FIGURE 3

Change in chocolate-related businesses in Brussels (2010-2017)



⁸ We have taken into account companies belonging to the following categories, according to the 2008 NACEBEL classification: 10.820 Production of cocoa, chocolate and sugar confectionary; 46.360 Wholesale of sugar, chocolate and sugar confectionary; 47.242 Retail of chocolate and sugar confectionary in specialist shops.

FIGURE 4



Source : Statbel

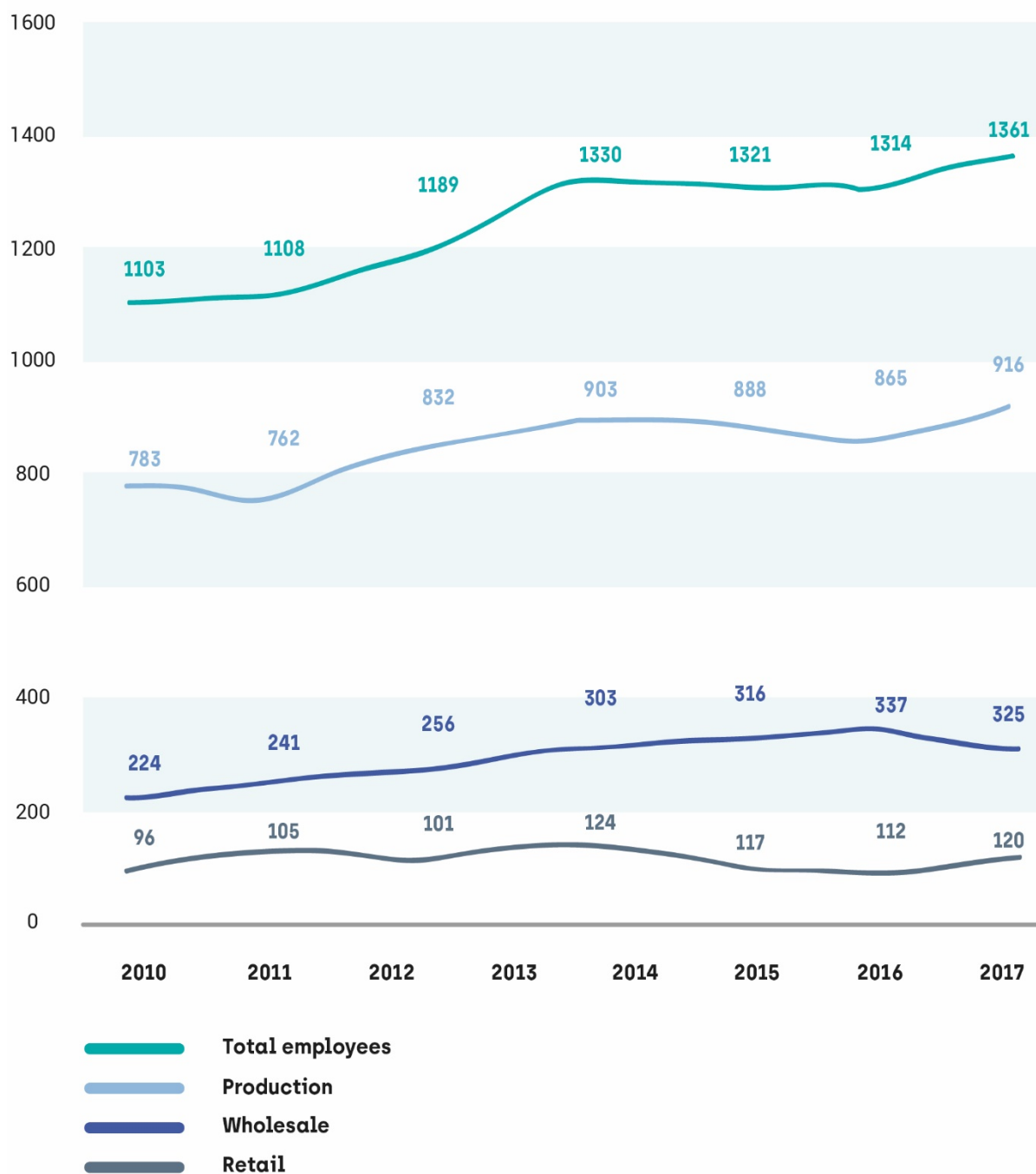
Logically and according to the figures above, the number of businesses opening has remained considerably higher than the number closing since 2012.

...and the number of people employed

Employment in the sector has also made strong progress, with a 23.4% growth between 2010 and 2016, while a stagnation, or even a slight decrease, was observed between 2013 and 2015 (see Figure 5). Similar increases were observed in the number of people employed in chocolate production, retail and wholesale.

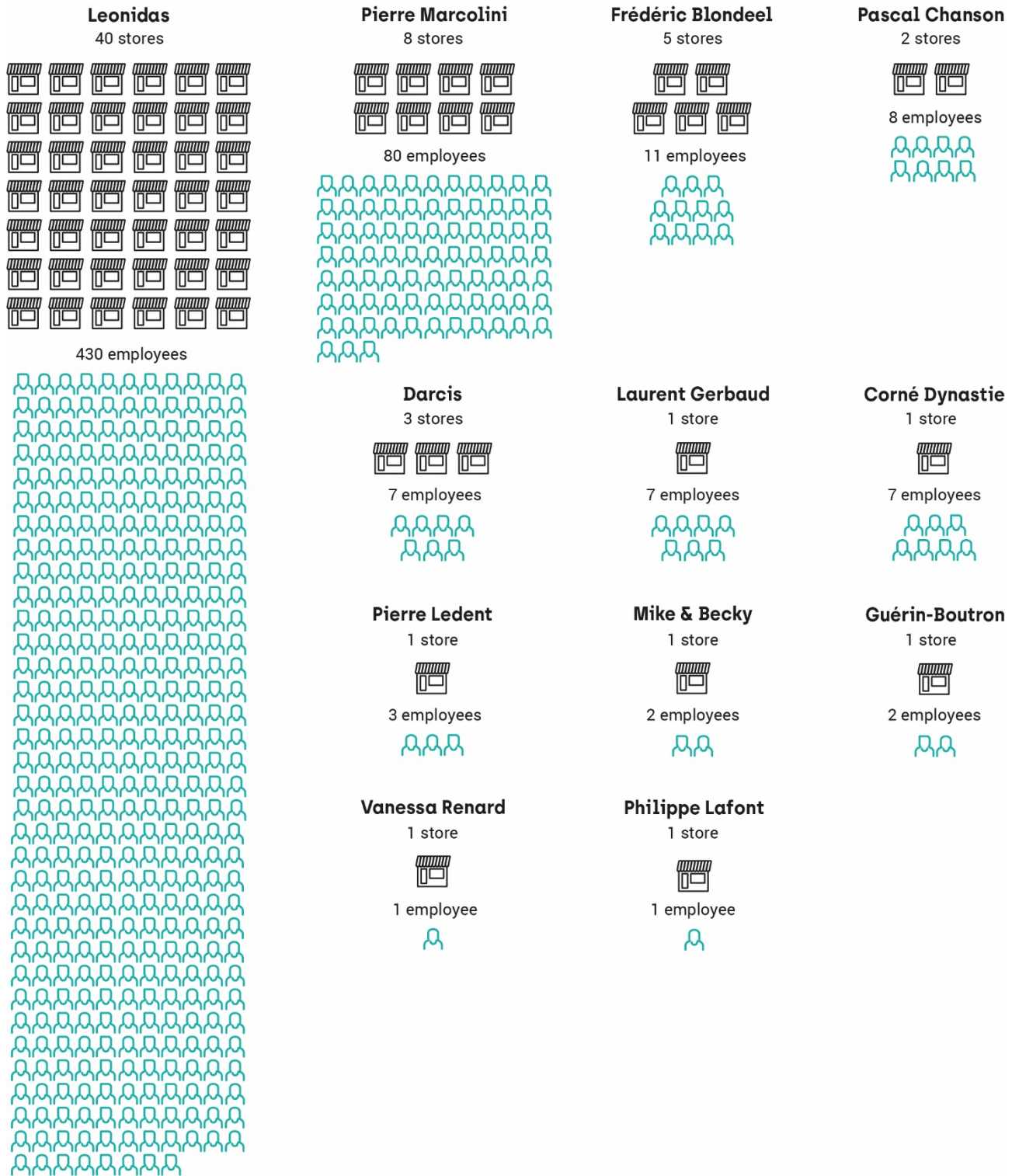
FIGURE 5

Change in employee numbers in the chocolate sector in Brussels (2010-2016).



Source : Statbel

FIGURE 6



(Data from june 2018)

Other stakeholders in the sector

While manufacturing facilities and chocolate retailers are the main representatives of the chocolate sector in Brussels and internationally, other stakeholders are also an integral part of the capital's chocolate industry. Here are some examples:

Barry Callebaut: although not based in Brussels, the Swiss giant owns four production units in Belgium. Hal, Thimister-Clermont, Heule and Wieze, home to the largest chocolate factory in the world. The latter supplies what is known as "couverture" chocolate to many Belgian chocolatiers. Today, a quarter of all chocolate consumed globally comes from the Barry Callebaut factories.

Choprabisco: the Royal Belgian Association of the Chocolate, Praline, Biscuit and Confectionary Industry. This federation, which operates on a nationwide level, has 170 members of all sizes, and offers them information, support and advice on specific matters (in particular food safety, labelling and trade).

The Belgian Chocolate House: Launched in 2015 by International Duty Free, this concept brings together some of the biggest names in Belgian chocolate (Neuhaus, Godiva, Corné Port Royal, Leonidas, etc.) in a single shop. The Belgian Chocolate House currently has around ten outlets, located in the country's major transport hubs (Zaventem and Charleroi Airports, Gare du Midi Station, etc.). This chain sells over 850 million tonnes of chocolate per year and received the Mercure Prize from Comeos for best shop concept in 2017.

Choco-Story : This is the new name for the Museum of Chocolate and Cocoa, located just metres from the Manneken- Pis. From Maya temples to the 17th century French Court, via the invention of praline, it traces the history of cocoa through interactive tours, games and demonstrations.

The Sound of Chocolate: this experience invites the public to discover chocolate in an unique way: chocolate tasting combined with music! This enables consumers to understand the interplay between the senses. The scientific research that underpins this project- conducted by Felipe Reinoso Carvalho as part of his PhD (currently in progress at KU Leuven) - seems to indicate that sounds can dramatically alter our perception of flavours. For example certain songs can accentuate the sweetness of chocolate, while others can highlight bitter notes. Three chocolatiers in the Sablon District (Leonidas, Frédéric Blondeel and Passion Chocolat) agreed to take part in this unique experiment, developed as part of the Make.Brussels project, launched in 2016⁹. Further information is available on the website of the project¹⁰.

⁹This campaign, launched by our Agency in 2016, aimed to boost the image of the city centre, while strengthening the appeal and retail dynamics of the ten principal shopping districts. "The Sound of Chocolate" was the winning project for the Sablon District.

¹⁰ <http://www.thesoundofchocolate.be>

1.2. A highly competitive sector

Representation of shops in the Brussels area

Change since 1950

Using data from the Belgian Retail and Industry Directory (Annuaire de commerce et de l'industrie de Belgique) from Mertens & Rosez and Sitex and surveys carried out by hub.brussels agents in 2017, we are able to track changes to chocolate and confectionary retailers since 1950¹¹.

These reveal a constant decrease in the number of retail outlets between 1950 and 1997. While there were 572 throughout the region in 1950, just 117 remained in 1997. It is worth noting that in the middle of the last century, these retail outlets were distributed fairly evenly throughout the region, although the density was lower in the South.

This even distribution gradually gave way to a greater concentration in the centre of the capital. However, an increase in retail outlets can be observed between 1997 and 2017. The number of "Chocolate - Confectionary" shops **increased by 66.6%** between 1997 and 2017 (+78 shops)¹².

¹¹We have retained this classification for these maps as data for chocolatiers alone were not available in 1950 and 1969.

¹² It should be noted that this trend among chocolatiers is the exception to the rule. During the same period, numerous specialist food shops, such as fishmongers (-19.3%), bakeries and patisseries (-21.9%), butchers and charcuteries (-43.9%) and cheesemongers and delicatessens (-54.5%) disappeared.

FIGURE 7

Changes to chocolate and confectionary retailers since 1950

1950 - 572 retail outlets



1969 - 200 retail outlets



1997 - 117 retail outlets



2017 - 195 retail outlets



Author: hub.brussels, 2018

Sources: hub.brussels, 2017 - Sitex, 1997 - Belgian Retail and Industry Directory, Mertens & Rosez, 1950 & 1969



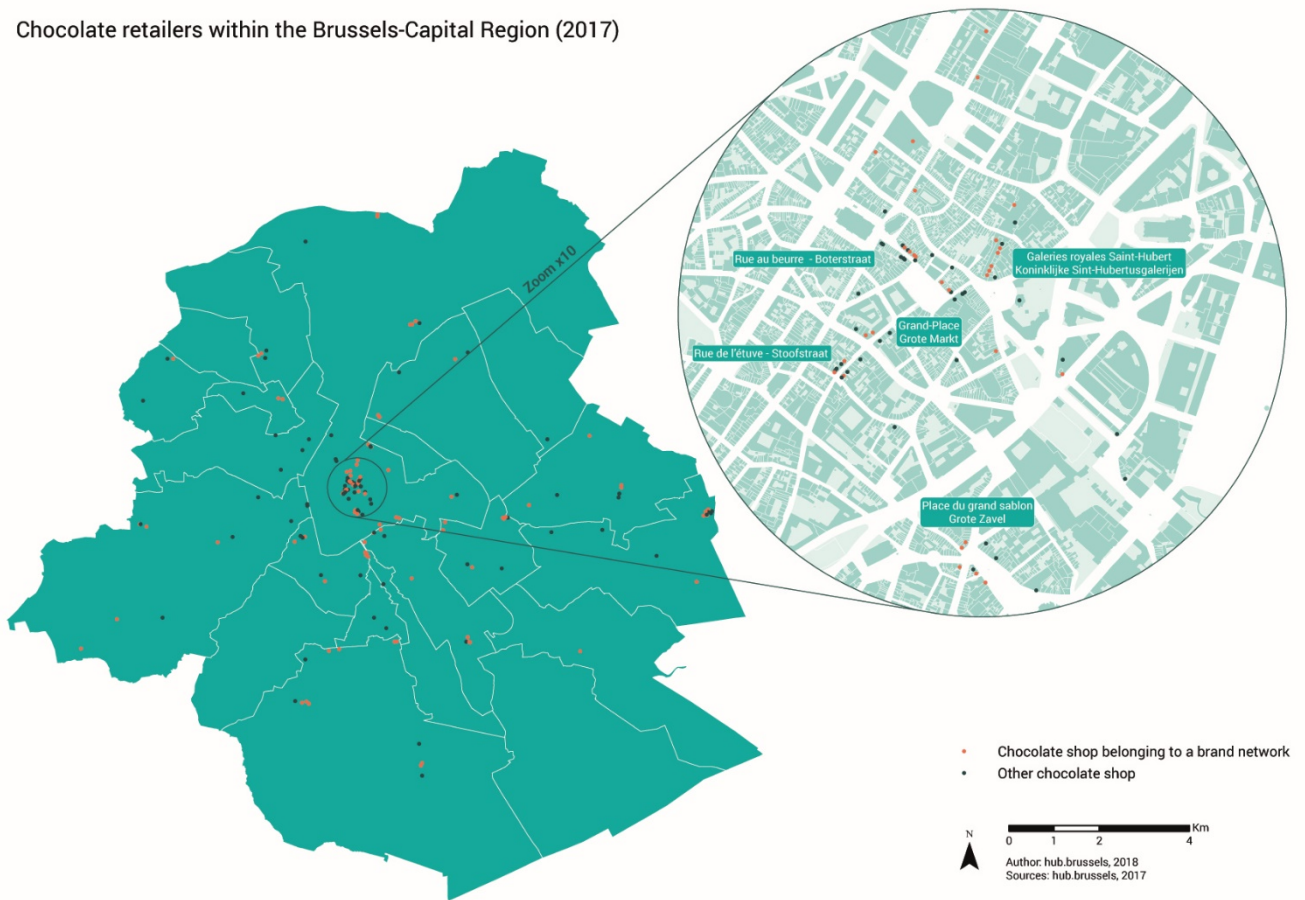
Districts with a high density of chocolatiers

Thanks to the surveys carried out by hub.brussels agents in 2017, we are able to visualise the distribution of chocolate retailers throughout the Region.

In order to better understand the distribution of retailers throughout Brussels, we decided to further subdivide them into two categories. "independents" and "major brands". Retailers with over seven retail outlets were categorised as "major brands". Finally, in order to be taken into account, the principal activity of the business must be chocolate production and/or retail.

FIGURE 8

Chocolate retailers within the Brussels-Capital Region (2017)



Unsurprisingly, we observed a strong concentration of chocolatiers in the central pentagon, more specifically around the Grand-Place, the tourist hub of the city.

The **Grand-Place district is the area with the highest number of chocolate-related businesses**. The latter are mainly situated along rue au Beurre, rue de la Colline et and the Royal Galleries of Saint-Hubert.

Sablon is another hotspot for chocolate in Brussels. Indeed, numerous chocolatiers have set up shop in place du Grand Sablon, where they rub shoulders with antique shops and contribute to the district's new nickname: the place Vendôme of chocolate.

Finally, we cannot neglect to mention the area surrounding the Manneken-Pis, in particular rue de l'Etuve, which is filled with chocolatiers of all shapes and sizes.

Therefore, while specialist food businesses (butchers, cheesemongers, bakers, etc.) have tended to disappear in recent years, mainly due to changing consumption habits (customers looking to reduce time spent shopping by using more general retailers), the opposite is true for chocolatiers. This growth, which is essentially concentrated in the city centre (where there was already a large presence) can be explained both by their increased focus on the tourist market and a renewed interest in gourmet products.

It should, however, be noted that chocolatiers are present outside the central pentagon, in particular in centre of certain **peripheral municipalities within the Brussels-Capital Region (Xavier de Bue and Fort Jaco in Uccle, Place du Miroir in Jette, etc.)** or in out of town shopping centres (Docks Bruxsel and Woluwe Shopping Center). This trend for shops opening outside of the city centre can be explained by the diminished appeal of the latter. This is mainly due to:

- A growing sense of insecurity in the city centre
- A lack of parking
- Inaccessibility (poor disabled access, construction work that is too frequent or lasts too long, etc.)(Dagnies & Goelff, 2016, p.8)

Mini retail hubs have strengthened the appeal of certain districts outside the city centre, and, logically, chocolatiers have taken advantage.

Which products ? Which services ?

What?

Since the invention of praline in 1912, chocolatiers have never stopped searching for new recipes, testing unconventional flavour combinations and adapting to changing palates, while maintaining their unique identity and expertise.

Below, we offer you a glimpse of the products sold by artisan retailers in Brussels (some of which are not manufactured by the retailers themselves):

Laurent Gerbaud:

pralines, “Gare aux Noisettes”, “Gingembrettes confites” (candied ginger).

Mike & Becky:

chocolate bars, hot chocolate.

(Patisserie) Pascal Chanson:

Viennese pastries, chocolate.

Valérie Goossens (Neuhaus):

pralines, biscuits, macarons, ice creams, tea, champagne, choco-sticks.

Darcis:

macarons, ice creams, pralines, bars, candied lemon peel, marshmallows, spreads.

Leonidas:

pralines, manons, fruit jellies, sweets, hot chocolate, ice cream, candied orange peel, marshmallows, marzipan, spreads.

Corné Dynastie:

biscuits, confectionary, sugared manons, marzipan, jams, spreads, fruit jellies, granolas.

Frédéric Blondeel:

pralines, bars, spreads, ice creams, chocolate powder.

Pierre Ledent:

pralines and macarons.

Guérin-Boutron:

bars, pralines.

Vanessa Renard:

pralines, bars and healthy snacks.

Pierre Marcolini:

chocolates, pralines, pastries, ice creams.

Philippe Lafont:

bars and pods.

(Data from September 2018)

How ?

We are increasingly seeing chocolatiers diversifying their business. While retail remains their main activity, chocolatiers are tending to expand their range of additional services. For some, offering additional services **has become a necessity**, as competition for the pure chocolate retail market has become too intense in recent years (we will look at this in greater detail in the next section). Examples of this include:

Mike & Becky:

workshop tour

Pierre Ledent:

tasting room.

Frédéric Blondeel:

tearoom, terrace and planned workshop tours in the future.

Corné Dynastie:

tour and occasional cooking workshops.

Leonidas:

tastings, events and product samples in the street.

Darcis:

chocolate museum, demonstrations, training (visiting foreign professionals), classes.

Guérin-Boutron:

(planned) workshops, teambuilding events, lectures on the subject of chocolate and chocolate production, chocolate parties at home.

Valérie Goossens:

pop-up shops, tea tastings, cocktail evenings, various events.

Vanessa Renard:

workshop visible from the street, workshops for adults and children.

(Data from September 2018)

1.3. Exports : potential for development

The appeal of Belgian chocolate on the export market

While the chocolate sector in the Brussels Region is currently very buoyant, the product itself is also highly sought-after on the foreign market. The majority of industry stakeholders believe that growth in the sector will be based mainly on exports, notably to emerging markets, where demand is increasing rapidly (Wagralim, 2016, p.15). Belgium certainly has ample potential to rise to this challenge.

According to a study carried out in 2014 by researchers from KU Leuven and Vlerick Business School, Belgium is the world's leading exporter of chocolate (Abraham, Studnicka, Van Hove, 2014, p.1). However, our country now faces increasing international competition. According to these researchers, Belgian chocolate exports have several interesting and unique characteristics.¹³

¹³This study is based on confidential data supplied by the National Bank of Belgium. It takes into account 22 different chocolate products and 1,403 Belgian companies exporting chocolate, as well as 80,153 companies exporting other products, for comparison.

It reveals that the relationship between Belgian chocolate exporters and their overseas partners are noticeably more long-lived than those in other industries ¹⁴ (Abraham, Studnicka, Van Hove, 2014, p.1-3), due to the high quality of the product. What is more, the period of time for which a company continues to export generally increases in line with the volume exported (not only for chocolate), the geographic spread and diversity of exports (Abraham, Studnicka, Van Hove, 2014, p.16).

Exports from Brussels in figures

In terms of the markets targeted by Belgium, the largest are France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States. Of the sector's "emerging", Canada and Japan hold great potential, while China and Russia are also expanding (65 companies exported to China and 55 to Russia in 2010, compared to 12 and 22, respectively, in 1999) (Abraham, Studnicka, Van Hove, 2014, p.6). Finally, increased competition on the international market does not affect Belgian chocolate exporters. In other words, Belgian chocolate is not easily replaced by other chocolates, at least in terms of exports (Abraham, Studnicka, Van Hove, 2014, p.6).

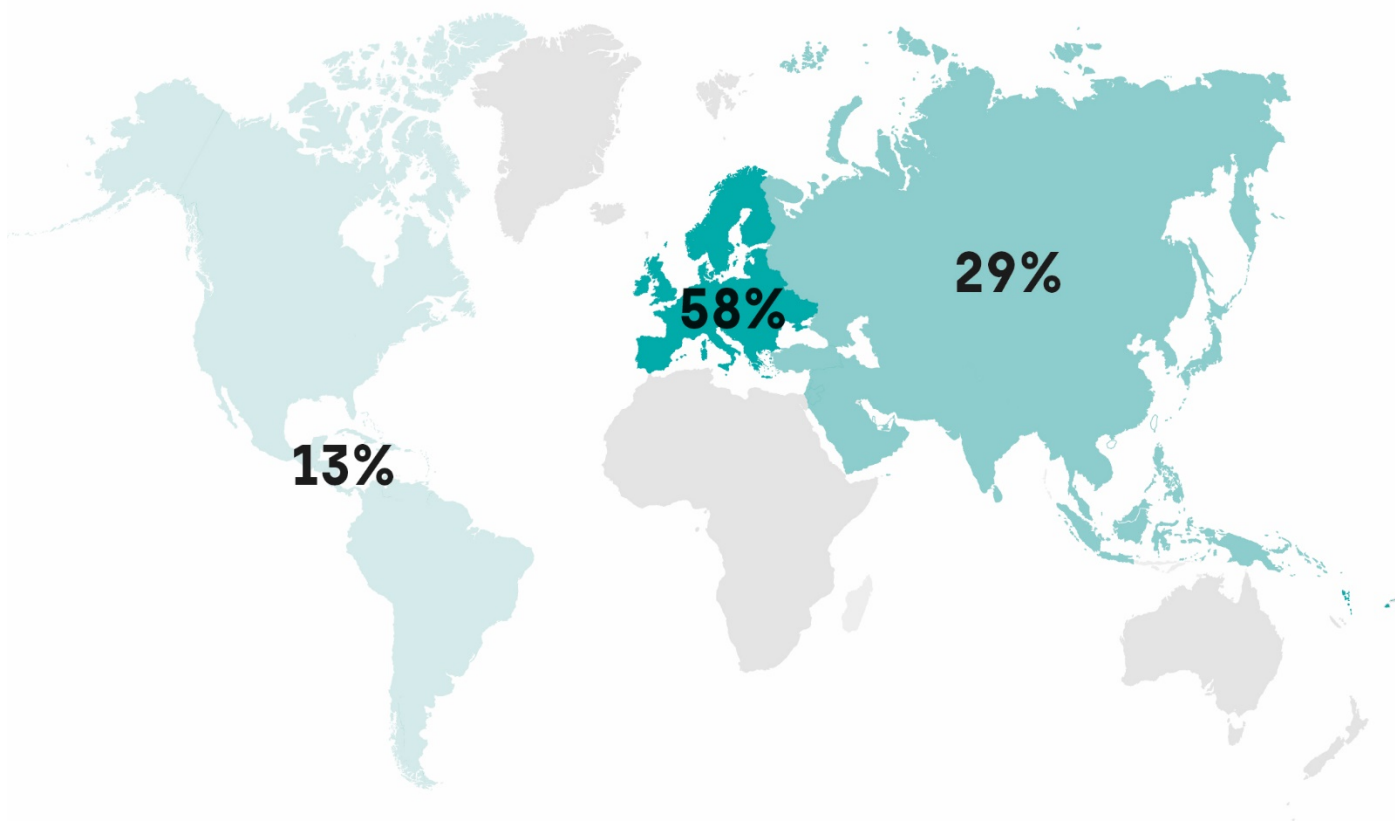
With regards to the Brussels-Capital Region specifically, in 2016 it exported around 5.6 % of Belgian cocoa products, almost three times as much as Wallonia (2%). This share had been growing since 2014, when it was just 4.8%. The latest National Bank of Belgium (BNB) data reveals a slight downturn in exports in 2017 (-3%) and a strong decline in 2018 (-26%). This trend is not replicated on a national level, where exports have remained relatively stable since 2015. It should be noted that the first statistics available for 2019 (month of January) are very encouraging for the sector, Brussels having already exported over 13.4 million euros worth of cacao products, compared to 6 million in January 2018.

In 2016, the principal international clients of the Brussels-Capital Region were Europe (58%, or 81.1 million euros), Asia (29%, or 39.7 million euros) and the Americas (13%, or 17.7 million euros) (see Figure 9).

¹⁴Around two years for "conventional" goods in most developed countries.

FIGURE 9

Global distribution of exports of cocoa and cocoa-based products from Brussels (2016)

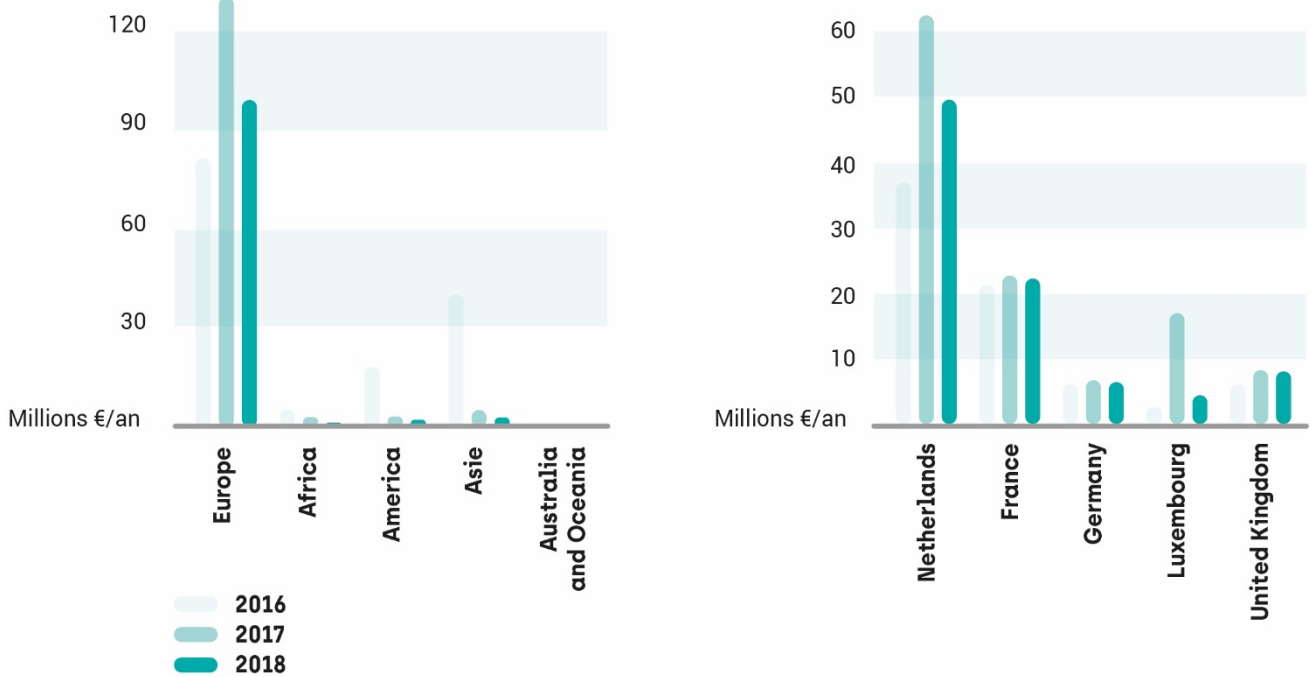


Source : National Bank of Belgium

On a European level, the main clients of the Brussels-Capital Region are, by some distance, our closest neighbours, headed by the Netherlands, France, Germany, Luxembourg and the United Kingdom. In 2017 and 2018, years during which the focus of exports from Brussels - no doubt temporarily - shifted towards Europe, these five countries accounted for 90% of Belgian chocolate product exports (see Figure 10).

FIGURE 10

Exports of cocoa and cocoa-based products from Brussels



Source : National Bank of Belgium

Looking back to 2016, an excellent year for Brussels in terms of exports, a quarter were destined for Asia, with Japan leading the pack (20.1 million euros), followed by Hong Kong (7.9 million euros), China (3.8 million euros), the United Arab Emirates (3.4 million euros) and Saudi Arabia (1.3 million euros). Although the figures for 2017 were less impressive, the latter remained significant customers, while newcomers, such as Qatar, Kuwait and South Korea also imported significant volumes.

1.4. Towards a more responsible chocolate industry

Precarious conditions upstream

While chocolate is synonymous with pleasure, we cannot ignore the harsh realities associated with its production. In order to be properly informed, future artisan chocolatiers and/or consumers must understand the everyday lives of those who produce cacao beans, often referred to as “brown gold”: extreme poverty, deforestation and child labour.

Risks of shortage

In order to grow, cacao trees need a hot, humid climate, within approximately 10° of the equator, commonly known as the “cacao belt” (Wagralim, 2016, p.10). (West) Africa is the largest cacao producer in the world (approximately 2/3 of total production), with Ivory Coast leading the pack (over a third of global production), followed by Ghana. A second region is located in Latin America (approximately 18%), in particular Ecuador (6% and Brazil (5.6%). Asia

and Oceania, which account for 10% of global production, (around 80% of which comes from Indonesia), complete our tour of the cacao growing regions (Wagralim, 2016, p.7).

Currently, certain varieties of bean such as *Forastero* (around 80% of global production, essentially in Africa), are at risk of shortage. The increasing concentration of the downstream cacao supply chain (processing of beans, chocolate manufacturers), especially since the 20th century, exerts an increased pressure upstream to constantly increase yields, which “creates risks to cacao supply.” (BASIC, 2016, p.24 ; Wagralim, 2016, p.26)¹⁵

Extreme poverty

While 90% of cacao beans globally are produced by 5.5 million small-scale operations, often family farms (between 2 and 10 ha), 70% of which are in West Africa (BASIC, 2016, p.24; Wagralim, 2016, p.26), the sector is blighted by extreme poverty, particularly in these countries. This phenomenon has become even more accentuated since the crisis that led to a drastic fall in the global market value of cacao between September 2016 and February 2017, following excessive cacao production at the expense of indigenous forests (Masset, 2018).

Several families working in the cacao farming industry live below the poverty threshold and bear the brunt of volatile prices. The *Cocoa Barometer*, produced every two years by an international consortium of NGOs and civil society associations, estimates that small-scale producers in Ivory Coast lost 37% of their income to this crisis (Fountain & Huetz-Adams, 2018, p.7).

Against this backdrop, some producers are even growing cacao at a loss. The majority of observers agree that measures must be taken to ensure that producers receive a decent income. A recent report by *Fairtrade International* established this “minimum income” as \$2.51 per day in Ivory Coast, while the current average is just \$0.78 (Fountain & Huetz-Adams, 2018, p.7).

Child labour and lack of infrastructure

In West Africa, many farmers live in rural areas with no roads, electricity, drinking water, medical services, education or other basic necessities.

A report by BASIC (bureau for societal analysis for citizen information), commissioned by the platform for fair trade explains that “due to poverty and a lack of educational infrastructure, children from agricultural families often end up working on the family farm. This is sometimes accompanied by the worst forms of child labour, as defined by the ILO conventions.” (BASIC, 2016, p.32)

Despite improved awareness, this phenomenon has increased in recent years, following the growth in chocolate production. The number of children working in the cacao industry is estimated to be 2.1 million in West Africa alone. “The recent increase in child labour appears to be the result of a combination of factors, including the poverty and structural insecurity of the producers, a lack of infrastructure and socio-political instability in the country,” (BASIC, 2016, p.49)

¹⁵ BASIC (Bureau for Societal Analysis for Citizen Information)

Deforestation

Since 1960, global cacao production has quadrupled, to the detriment of native forests, particularly in West Africa (Fountain & Huetz-Adams, 2018, p.17). According to the *Cocoa Barometer*, this deforestation can be explained by the disinterest of the multinationals in environmental impact, as well as an almost total absence of governmental regulations to protect these regions.

Consequently, over 90% of native forest in West Africa has disappeared. The phenomenon of deforestation is clear in Ivory Coast, in particular for historical reasons: *"For many years, forest clearance was promoted by the Houphouët-Boigny regime promoted, in an effort to profit economically from the Ivory Coast's abundant forests. However, the more an area is deforested, the less valuable it becomes. This has given rise to migration and new pioneer farming areas have developed, encroaching further and further West".* These movements have led to the loss of forest (BASIC, 2016, p51-52). *"This phenomenon is accentuated by farming practices that lead to soil impoverishment."* (BASIC, 2016, p.46-47)¹⁶

What is more,

a plot of forested land recently claimed as cacao plantation is extremely attractive from a financial perspective, as the richness of the soil promotes the growth of cacao trees, shaded by the yam plants and banana trees planted to protect them during the first years of life. (BASIC, 2016, p.52)

Due to a lack of economic resources, growers prefer to expand their plantations rather than intensify their workload: *"they clear another plot of forested land in order to profit from the "forest income" again, for around twenty years."*

Furthermore, *"the model promoted by the chocolate industry not only presupposes the specialisation of growers and the expansion of cacao growing areas into the forest, but also the use of chemical inputs."* (BASIC, 2016, p.53) Today, yields in Ivory Coast are among the lowest in the world, and the impact of deforestation on the climate is also a factor (BASIC, 2016, p.33 ; 42). The situation is different in Latin America, in particular in Peru, an example that we will look at in greater detail below.

Taking responsibility downstream

The *Cocoa Barometer* is sounding the alarm: while global awareness is increasing, appropriate actions and policies are slow to follow.

Western Europe, the United States and Australia are not only the largest block of consumer nations; they are also home to the majority of the large chocolate multinationals. As such, they have a doubly important role to play in creating a cacao sector that respects human rights and the environment (Fountain & Huetz-Adams, 2018, p.33).

Nevertheless, some recent initiatives are worthy of note:

¹⁶ Since the 1960s, the chocolate industry has favoured a farming model in Ivory Coast that verges on monoculture, with a lack of shade plants.

- In Belgium, the *Beyond chocolate*¹⁷ partnership, launched in late 2018 by Deputy Prime-Minister and Minister of Cooperation for Development Alexander De Croo. Through this partnership for sustainable Belgian chocolate, the chocolate industry, major distributors and civil society commit to fighting child labour and deforestation and to ensuring cacao producers receive a decent income.
- On a global level, the gradual implementation of the ISO standard¹⁸ for sustainable and traceable cacao.
- The Cocoa and Forest19 Initiative, launched in 2017 by the world's leading chocolate companies, alongside the governments of Ivory Coast and Ghana, and coordinated by the World Cocoa Foundation (WCF), the Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH) and the International Sustainability Unit founded by the Prince of Wales. This Initiative has enabled the publication of action plans to end deforestation in the cacao supply chain and restore forested areas. (World Cocoa Foundation, 2019)

Certifications

Fairtrade was developed in the 1960s, in response to the economic models of the agrofood industry.

Stakeholders in the supply chain have made certain commitments in order to enable farmers and workers to earn a living from their work and make collective long term investments.

Fairtrade meets the demands of consumers who want to make more responsible purchasing choices. **It is based on four founding principles:**

- **Collective and democratic organisation** enables farmers and workers to play a role in management and negotiation. This enables the development of long-term strategies in order to guarantee sustainable living standards and environmental protection.
- **A minimum price is guaranteed**, offering protection from the volatility of commodity markets.
- **A Fairtrade Premium is granted**, to be spent on projects chosen collectively by groups of small-scale farmers and workers, in order to enable them “ *to develop revenue-generating activities, improve their standard of living and reduce their vulnerability to poverty.* ” (BASIC, 2016, p.34)
- **Consumer awareness campaigns**, aimed at encouraging shoppers to consider the origin of their purchases and the environmental and social conditions of their production. The aim is therefore to exert pressure for greater transparency in agricultural supply chains.

¹⁷ https://diplomatie.belgium.be/fr/newsroom/nouvelles/2018/beyond_chocolate

¹⁸ <https://www.befair.be/fr/content/la-norme-isocen-cacao-durable-prend-du-retard;>
<https://www.iso.org/fr/standards.html>

¹⁹ <https://www.worldcocoafoundation.org/press-release/plans-daction-pour-mettre-fin-a-la-deforestation-publies-par-les-gouvernements-de-cote-divoire-et-du-ghana-et-par-les-principales-entreprises-du-chocolat-et-du-cacao/>

These fairer conditions are certified by the Fairtrade International (FI) label.

In the 1990s, other sustainability labels were launched, directly “competing” with the existing Fairtrade certification, and operating under similar conditions. Two major systems operate within the industry: sustainability labels Rainforest Alliance (RA) and UTZ Certified, which plan to merge into Rainforest Alliance Certified from late 2019/20.

Of the three labels mentioned above, the Fairtrade Label is the oldest and most rigorous. The Fairtrade Premium is fixed, which is not the case for the sustainability certifications (where it is negotiated between buyer and seller) (Wagralim, 2016, p.24).



It should be noted that:

The sustainability certifications respond to two challenges facing manufacturers in the sector: restoring the positive image of the sector among customers while maintaining high-volumes of uninterrupted supply. Mars, for example, has committed to use 100% sustainable cacao by 2020, notably by working with the Rainforest Alliance (BASIC, 2016, p.36).

Promising but insufficient results

According to Fairtrade Belgium, 136,000 tonnes of Fairtrade certified cacao beans were sold worldwide in 2016, a 27% increase in four years. These were produced by 179,000 small-scale growers, over 140,000 of whom operate in West Africa. However, chocolate produced using Fairtrade cacao accounted for just 1% of the Belgian market in 2017 (2,744 tonnes), although this has increased by 45% (Masset, 2018).

What’s more, as outlined above, the desired outcomes are far from being achieved in terms of human rights and environmental protection. A report by BASIC in May 2016 compared two very different situations - those of **cacao farmers working under these certifications in Ivory Coast and Peru**.

In the 2000s, “mass certification” programmes developed within the Ivorian cacao industry. The sector needed to continue importing ever-increasing volumes of beans in order to attract industrial manufacturers (BASIC, 2016, p.54). By 2014, it was estimated that 10% of Ivorian cacao production was sold under the three aforementioned certification schemes. In the specific case of **Ivory Coast**, these certifications are implemented by the dominant stakeholders in the cacao supply chain. Certain cooperatives hold all three.

²⁰ <https://utz.org/merger/>

However, the report notes that the impact of these Fairtrade and sustainability certifications is, at best, lukewarm. According to several studies, they have done nothing to reduce structural low pay. The same goes for the social impact (working conditions, health, child labour, etc.).

Some effects were seen in environmental terms: while deforestation continues there is better management of chemical inputs, thanks to criteria imposed by both sustainability and Fairtrade certifications. Finally, while it is not a miracle cure, the Fairtrade Premium can generate improvements on a local level: it provides a small additional income to farmers, and can provide cooperatives with training or proper equipment. Sustainability certifications also offer a premium to “encourage quality” This is lower (BASIC, 2016, p.59).

While **Peru** remains a lightweight compared to Ivory Coast in terms of the volume of cacao beans exported, its exports continue to grow. After the Dominican Republic, it is the second largest exporter of organic cacao in Latin America (BASIC, 2016, p.66).

Following the civil war and the emergence of illegal coca farming in the 1980s, the Peruvian government, with the backing of the US government, began promoting *cacao farming* in the 2000s. Unlike Ivory Coast, the majority of plantations use an agroforestry system that favours self-sufficiency with cacao as a “cash crop” (it provides 60 to 70% of the household incomes of its approximately 90,000 growers) (BASIC, 2016, p.69). In the long term, however, the strategy seems to favour the diversification of subsistence and cash crops.

Another unique quality of the Peruvian situation is the development of numerous cooperatives, organisations that historically developed alongside the coffee industry in the 1960s. These became genuine social enterprises in the 1980s, before experiencing some setbacks (lack of internal democracy) since 2010 (BASIC, 2016, p.70).

While the recorded yields of the plantations are among the highest in Latin America and higher than those in Ivory Coast (by around 50%) cacao growers face similar income problems; the majority live below the poverty line. The impact is all too familiar: an inability to invest in plantations, leading to reduced yields, threats to food security and child labour in production, although to a lesser extent than in Ivory Coast.

However, Peru is less badly affected by the phenomenon of deforestation, as the majority of cacao plantations use agroforestry systems. This farming method is far more environmentally friendly and respectful of biodiversity, to such an extent that it is considered one of the principal means of fighting deforestation²¹. The tradition of cooperatives and the use of agroforestry methods have both impacted positively on the success of Fairtrade development in Peru.

In this country, an increase in the price guaranteed to producers, in addition to the **Fairtrade Premium**, enable cacao growers to earn a sufficient income to cover production costs, and lift them out of poverty.

²¹ However, massive deforestation of Peruvian Amazonia was recorded in 2014. This was caused by United Cacao, a multinational eager to apply the agro-industrial model favoured in South-East Asia. The unstable situation and the risk of shortages in West Africa make future investments of this sort in Peru a cause for concern. (BASIC, 2016, p.77).

This gives rise to a positive chain of events, making it possible to invest in plantations (upkeep, development, diversification), increase yields, hire qualified workers rather than family members, improve healthcare and education and encourage women to participate in the sector and its cooperatives (BASIC, 2016, p. 78-84).

At the same time, **sustainability certifications** encourage growers to use chemical inputs better and combine different varieties in a single plantation²². According to the report by *BASIC*, while they reduce negative impacts, **these sustainability certifications do not trigger the same positive chain reaction as Fairtrade supply chains**, due to the production costs involved (increased working hours) and the low level of premium offered (BASIC, 2016, p.87).

In conclusion, based on the aforementioned report, we can say that in order to trigger a **positive chain reaction** in a Fairtrade supply chain, certain criteria must be met:

- **Solid, democratic cooperatives, capable of development.**
- **The guarantee of an income above the poverty threshold and a high enough premium** to strengthen cooperatives and their investments.
- **The spread of agroforestry systems**, to make the impact of Fairtrade sustainable.
- **The promotion of quality cacao and single-origin production among customers and consumers** (BASIC, 2016, p.96).

²²So that growers capitalise on the productivity of certain plants and the added-value of certain, more costly, high-end varieties.

1.5. In summary

It cannot be denied that the sector has showed remarkable dynamism in recent years. Indeed, the Brussels region has seen the **number of businesses** (+21% between 2010 and 2017) and the **number of employees** (+23,4% between 2010 and 2016) grow.

This trend is also borne out in the **distribution of shops** throughout the Region. The number of retail outlets has risen from 117 in 1997 to 195 in 2017 (an increase of almost 70%). Several districts within the Central Pentagon are benefitting from this vitality, in particular the Grand-Place district (the area of the region with the most chocolate retailers), Sablon and the area surrounding the Manneken-Pis.

However, **certain outlying municipalities** have not been left behind (Place Miroir in Jette, Xavier de Bue and Fort Jaco in Uccle) and are also benefitting from the increasing **tourist** draw of chocolate, as well as a renewed interest in **gourmet products**.

This dynamism is also reflected in **export figures**, and despite increased international competition, our country remains **one of the largest exporters** of chocolate in the world (alongside the Netherlands). As for the Brussels Region, while most exports are destined for Europe, Asia is also a growing market. In 2016, a quarter of exports from Brussels were destined for this continent, mainly Japan, Hong Kong and China.

It is, however, worth noting that **numerous issues** (social, ethical, environmental, etc.) persist, in particular upstream of production. Several varieties of bean are at risk of **shortage** due to the **race for higher yields**. Cacao production has also increased fourfold since 1960, which has had a drastic impact on forests. Over 90% of native forest in West Africa has disappeared, in particular in Ivory Coast, where the phenomenon of **deforestation** is endemic.

What is more, the sector remains blighted by **poverty**, a phenomenon further accentuated by the crisis that shook the cacao market in 2016-2017. Some producers are even growing cacao at a loss. Meanwhile, **child labour** remains widespread. It is estimated that 2.1 million children are working in the cacao industry in West Africa alone.

These various issues require **downstream supply chains to take responsibility**. Some initiatives have already been introduced in Belgium and worldwide, while **fair trade** (promoted by various types of certification) continues to develop.

2. The sector as seen by its stakeholders



"It's a complex business!" According to Frédéric Blondeel, this one phrase succinctly describes the chocolate sector in the capital. Because, as we have just highlighted, the chocolate market in Brussels is expanding and undergoing dramatic structural changes.

Beyond the figures presented in the previous sections, it is essential to consider the qualitative aspect of the sector. hub.brussels has therefore handed over the floor to industry stakeholders, in order to discover their views of the sector, their hopes and fears for the future, and how they are responding to recent changes.

2.1. A rapidly changing sector

The pride of Belgium

As Frédéric Blondeel made clear, the sector in question is complex. Supply is expanding, the target consumer and their preferences are changing. However, we must not forget that chocolate is one of Belgium's culinary specialities and our professionals are globally renowned for their expertise.

"It is a sector we should be proud of", says Valérie Goossen, who owns several Neuhaus franchises. *"Belgium invented the praline and the ballotin".* We hear the same story from Jean-Philippe Darcis, who believes chocolate *"can boast a very strong heritage and tradition"*, and Philippe de Selliers, CEO of Leonidas, who *"sees, in the world of pralines, a universe of delicate flavours with increasingly sophisticated recipes."* The result: just like beer and chips, Belgian chocolate benefits from a prestigious reputation and fame, which has, for many years, transcended national borders.

So, praise for the sector continues to flow. It has, however, had to remain alert to the changes that going on around it, particularly in terms of customer expectations.

A broader and more ethically-aware audience

Consumption patterns have evolved and the yesterday's consumer is not the same as the consumer of today. This is due, in particular to the cost of raw materials and the impact of trends. What is more, *"since 1994 we have seen a broadening of the target market of chocolatiers. Before, people did not hesitate to purchase 1 kg, or even 1.5 kg, ballotin gift boxes. Today, young people in particular buy in much smaller volumes"*, says Frédéric Blondeel.

Indeed, it is now rare to find ballotins larger than 320g in store, particularly among the new generation of Belgian chocolatiers. Once again, the views of Jean-Philippe Darcis support those of Frédéric Blondeel: *"The chocolate sector has undergone a major evolution since 1995 and the boom sparked by Pierre Marcolini (nb: it was in this year that he became the world patisserie champion). Pralines have become far smaller than before. We've gone from 12-15g to 8-10g. There are also far more enrobed chocolates than in the past."*

One explanation for this observation may be the fact that, despite a difficult economic situation, chocolate continues to be associated with pleasure, so consumers find it hard to go without. This led to small portions becoming the norm. **Concepts favouring small bites, packaged in larger, resealable containers are on the increase.** Since production costs are on the rise, the size of a chocolate bar has tended to decrease in order to maintain a similar retail price (Wagralim, 2016, p.22).

Naturally, chocolatiers have been forced to adapt to the times and to these shifts in the market. *“Customers are demanding, but they have also become more aware and conscious of ingredients and their provenance. Customers also want to see and participate in the production process”, observes Frédéric Blondeel. “Marcolini brought pralines up to date, making them more trendy. People want more flavour, more choice, more Fairtrade, more healthy products... He has put praline back in the spotlight. In short, chocolate adapts to consumption habits and follows trends, just like any other gourmet product”, says Philippe de Selliers.*

Regularly cited by his fellow professionals, Pierre Marcolini asserts that:

Four main strands of consumer behaviour have influenced chocolatiers in recent years: in addition to wanting smaller product sizes, consumers have expressed a desire for less sweet products, greater transparency and a need for authenticity (Interview, September 2018).

According to Philippe Lafont, who owns a choco-truck (Pure Chococ), however, this change is not only happening among young people:

Older customers are also looking for purer chocolates, in particular dark chocolate with a cacao content of over 70%. There is also a trend for chocolate/salt combinations, which have become very popular. For example, white chocolate sauces with savoury dishes and salted caramel flavours are in high demand (Interview, October 2018).

Chocolatiers clearly understand that they cannot just run their businesses as they did twenty years ago. Being good is one thing, staying good is another (and, perhaps, considerably more difficult) (Wagralim, 2016, p.15)! Therefore, they must experiment, innovate and surprise in order to meet customer demand. *“The younger generation of chocolatiers has opened up to new flavours in recent years, which has contributed to a mini revolution in Belgian chocolate making”, reflects Jean-Philippe Darcis.*

As for Laurent Gerbaud, he believes that *“the public is generally very receptive”*. However, certain efforts could, and should, be made to provide customers with more information, particularly with regards to the origin of ingredients or the manufacturing process. *“Customers are not well enough informed and not enough information is available. There is a great need to inform customers about what they are eating and the different stakeholders involved in the sector”, says Bjorn Becker, founder of Mike & Becky.*

Christmas cheer, Easter – oh dear!

The chocolate sector is, by nature, seasonal. Indeed, while it has been tantalising taste buds in Brussels for decades, chocolate does not sell in the same volumes all year round: unsurprisingly, festive periods are the main focus of activity in the sector. These periods are essentially concentrated between the months of October and January, so the challenge is to produce sufficient quantities to meet demand during the Christmas and new year period. For artisans and praline makers, Christmas, and, as a result, December is, as always, the month of chocolate.

During this period, customers are less attentive to prices, and chocolate remains one of the most popular gift items. According to Laurent Gerbaud, almost 30% of annual turnover is achieved during the November-December period, and this reality is borne out among the majority of the chocolatiers we interviewed.

While Christmas remains the best time of year for chocolate sales, stakeholders have observed a decline in interest in other festivities. *“In general, chocolatiers are not performing as strongly around Easter and the feast of Saint Nicholas, due to competition from the supermarkets”,* notes Frédéric Blondeel.

Easter is not as profitable as it used to be, due to competition and chocolate prices. Anyone can manufacture and sell eggs and drive down prices at this time of year. It is essential to specialise in products that industrial manufacturers do not offer, affirms Jean-Philippe Darcis (Interview, May 2018).

Philippe de Selliers, however, has experienced the opposite. While Easter remains a strong period for the Belgian chocolatier, he has seen sales fall during the Christmas period. *“This is definitely a result of our brand image; we offer affordable high-end chocolate, while customers tend to opt for more expensive chocolate at Christmas, as they buy it as a gift”,* he reflects.

However, the situation is similar for all chocolatiers after the month of April, when business reduces drastically. In general, chocolatiers are highly weather-dependant.

Above 20°C, it becomes more difficult to store chocolate. Consequently, if Easter falls later in the year, when the weather is warmer, they run the risk of losing 20% of their turnover. It is similar at Christmas: in the case of heavy snowfall, people travel less to buy chocolate, explains Pierre Marcolini (Interview, September 2018).

This seasonality has direct consequences for small businesses: the need to close for several weeks, or even months, over Summer. *“We are even forced to temporarily lay off two workers during the Summer months”,* says Antoine Corné, with regret. Chocolatiers do, however, have something to smile about: after a very difficult 2016-2017 financial year (due notably to the Paris and Brussels attacks), the sector experienced a strong upturn in 2018.

2.2. A suffering sector

A saturated sector

Despite the relative balance between supply and demand in Brussels and a visible growth in turnover (see. chapter 1), all is not well in the sector. It is still undergoing a period of restructuring, and according to many, one of its main problems is the increasing number of chocolatiers in the capital. *“There are too many chocolatiers in Brussels. It is damaging the sector”,* believes Valérie Goossens. *“The market is becoming saturated, it is absolutely essential to set yourself apart, to find your niche”* agrees Vanessa Renard. *“In the beginning, we were the only chocolatier in Woluwe Shopping Center; today there are four”,* complains Antoine Corné.

Jean-Philippe Darcis is less categorical: *“there’s room for everyone. Each chocolate shop has a different clientele.”* Pierre Marcolini is also measured. In his opinion, the main issue is the business model. *“You must reinvent yourself”,* he claims.

For example, with tourists, you must focus on advertising and marketing upstream, rather than advertising in Belgian airports. The majority of Asian tourists travel as part of organised groups, and have little room for improvisation once they arrive in Brussels. Therefore, we must target tour operators and encourage them to include certain chocolate hotspots in their itineraries (Interview, May 2018).

Those who complain of excessive supply also bemoan a loss of visibility, both among locals and tourists. *“Consumers are confused by the choice on offer. What is more, for inexperienced customers, the distinction between industrial manufacturers and artisans is blurred”,* explains Jean-Philippe Darcis. *“The best known chocolatiers are industrial operations, so tourists naturally gravitate towards this segment. ”*

This also raises the question of the phrase “Belgian chocolate”, used indiscriminately. Indeed, overuse of the words ‘Belgian chocolate’ for products not actually manufactured in Belgium (particularly in convenience stores in tourist areas) may harm the sector and the reputation of Belgian chocolate (Wagralim, 2016, p.15).

Economic constraints

In parallel with the potential issues arising from excessive supply, external constraints also seem to be increasing. Frédéric Blondeel points the finger at the lack of protection for artisans. This lack of protection could be resolved through political measures (*“taxes are too high, there should be a specific status”*). Jean-Philippe-Darcis complains of the lack of formal requirements to access the profession. *“It is nonsense to call Belgium the country of chocolate. There needs to be some control”,* he stresses.

According to Guy Gallet, Secretary-General of Choprabisco, small businesses also suffer as a result of the rules and requirements imposed on them by AFSCA (the Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain): *"They are increasingly difficult for small businesses to comply with, especially in terms of administration and traceability."* Antoine Corné, who employs seven people, agrees: *"Under AFSCA, everything must be labelled in French and Flemish in Brussels. That is hard for an artisan producer, especially when you have to complete this task for over 130 product lines single-handedly."*²³

Add to this the rising cost of raw materials and the decreasing spending power of consumers, and it can be very difficult for chocolatiers to stay afloat. *"These days, it is difficult to make a living just by producing chocolate"*, says a slightly defeatist Jean-Philippe Darcis.

Necessary extras

As we have already mentioned, it is becoming essential to diversify, offering customers other types of service. *"Businesses cannot remain static, they must always create a buzz and diversify"*, explains Valérie Goossens, who offers activities including tea tastings and cocktail evenings at her Neuhaus shops. *"You need to give customers a reason to visit."*

The idea of creating a tasting area next to the point of sale was also mentioned by Pierre Marcolini, Frédéric Blondeel, Jean-Philippe Darcis and Mike & Becky. Others, such as Vanessa Renard, Corné Dynastie (intermittently), Guérin-Boutron and Laurent Gerbaud, offer or plan to offer workshops, classes and tours in order to set themselves apart.

As we stressed above, the Belgian chocolate market is complex. It has huge potential and displays an enduring dynamism, but at the same time, businesses are subject to numerous constraints that drive them to continue innovating and diversifying tirelessly.

What's more, the consumer base in Brussels is constantly expanding. What are their reasons for purchasing? What is their attachment to chocolate? How do they view the chocolate market? A consumer focus group was invited to hub.brussels to answer these questions.

A better assesment of Belgian chocolate

Belgium is known worldwide for its expertise, its chocolate and its pralines. However, it remains difficult to assess the overall quality of the product.

Because there is chocolate and chocolate. Around Grand-Place in Brussels, for example, some shops sell low quality chocolate. This is not exactly good international advertising. The "Belgian Chocolate" label is used for marketing purposes, explained Jean-Philippe Darcis in 2014 in an article in l'Avenir (Verbist, 2014).

Because, ultimately, what is Belgian chocolate? Chocolate produced in Belgium? Chocolate packaged in Belgium? Or just chocolate sold in Belgium? *"There is still no legal protection, everyone is free to do as they please"*, he adds.

²³ It should, however, be noted that AFSCA has recently introduced measures to make monitoring and traceability requirements more flexible for certain types of business with insufficient means to carry out a risk analysis. More information on this [subject is available on the AFSCA website](#).

Numerous chocolatiers bemoan the lack of regulation by the authorities, as well as the absence of a Belgian chocolate quality label. However, Belgium did attempt to launch a label of this type in 2000.

The Belgian government created the Ambao brand in response to a European directive authorising producers to use vegetable fats other than cacao butter. This was an effort to safeguard 100% cacao chocolate.

However, this label failed to materialise, as, while chocolatiers respected the regulations for the casing of pralines, this was not always the case for the fourrage.

According to Marc Vandercammen, Director-General of the Consumer Organisation Study and Information Centre (CRIOC), the failure of the label is due to the fact that the specifications were cumbersome and laborious and, at the time, several foreign investors, who were less concerned by the issue, had purchased Belgian brands (Vanwelde, 2011).

Jean-Philippe Darcis also recalls the short-lived Belgian Chocolate Way. Based on the European Chocolate Way, this route aimed to promote and defend quality chocolate, encompassing museums, chocolatiers, collectors and other food specialists. Created in 2014, the route no longer exists.

Though conscious of the benefits of a label, chocolatiers have differing opinions on how it should be implemented. According to Laurent Gerbaud, it is necessary to *“provide customers with more information and state the sugar content more explicitly, in order to make them aware of the quality and environmental impact. That would be a good start.”*

As for, Antoine Corné, he is fighting for label for products “made in Belgium”, not just “packaged in Belgium”, while Valérie Goossens hopes to extend the **scope of the label beyond the product, to include service and hygiene.**

Meanwhile, Vanessa Renard would like to see greater differentiation between artisans and industrial producers, while Bjorn Becker wants more support from the authorities. *“It’s up to them to inform the consumer”*, he explains. Finally, Pascal Chanson puts forward the idea that *“labels should be issued by the suppliers themselves, who have a clear idea of what businesses are producing. They could promote artisans.”*

Johan Domas-Conzemius and Frédéric Blondeel, meanwhile, cite benchmarks and information resources such as the Gault & Millau Guide²⁴ or the EPV (Living Heritage Company)²⁵ in France as sources of inspiration for a future label.

We should, however, point out that there is a legally recognised artisan status does exist, awarded by the FPS Economy Artisan Committee. This status recognises the authenticity of businesses and the manual nature of their work, as well as their expertise.

²⁴In 2015, the French gastronomic guide launched an edition 100% devoted to chocolate and patisserie. This guide primarily showcases the numerous artisans working in these fields, as well as brightest talents in the country. The French²⁵ Living Heritage Company label is issued by the Ministry of Economy and Finance. It recognises French companies possessing excellent artisanal and industrial expertise.

In order to be eligible, artisans must be registered with Banque-Carrefour des Entreprises (the Belgian Companies Register), have less than 20 employees and work in a field involving the production, transformation, repair or restoration of objects or the provision of services.

During the selection process, the Committee takes into account the manual and authentic nature of the business and its expertise, with a focus on quality, tradition and design.

Those granted the status are then allowed to use a logo for six years. While some people, including Philippe Lafont, see this label as the most trustworthy available and “*the only one worth bothering with*”, not everyone agrees. Indeed, Pierre Marcolini believes that this label is absurd as *bean-to-bar* chocolatiers with over 20 employees cannot apply, while other, smaller, companies that do not manufacture their own chocolate are eligible.

Consequently, Pierre Marcolini suggests creating a specific *bean-to-bar* label, based not on the size of the business, but on the actual percentage of *bean-to-bar* in the range and a charter of values.

2.3. Chocolate, a food that divides consumers

As stated in the methodology section²⁶, a focus group of chocolate-lovers living in the capital was interviewed as part of a focus group. The aim? To better understand the chocolate sector in Brussels.

This qualitative and collaborative approach enabled us to gain maximum *insight* from the consumers and understand their motivations, both innate and emotional. By doing so, we hoped to understand how consumers envisage the future of the chocolate market and what improvements the interviewees would like to see.

But before all of this, it is important to understand the relationship consumers have with chocolate.

L'attachement à l'authenticité

When I was little, my grandmother brought us a box of pralines every week when she visited. We were very lucky if we were allowed to eat just one praline a day. To prolong the pleasure, I used to collect the wrappers: I carefully smoothed the gold, silver, red pink and blue papers with my finger. I kept them in a pretty box and I was proud of my collection, reminisces Viviane, aged 62.

For most of those interviewed, it soon became clear that **their first memories of chocolate dated back to early childhood**. These memories were also frequently associated with their grandparents and the simple pleasures of childhood.

A lifelong chocolate lover, Yunus, aged 26, confirms this: “*One of my earliest memories is of the chocolate cones wrapped in golden paper that my grandmother used to buy me on special occasions. I am always nostalgic when I see them.*” Chocolatiers are keen to exploit this niche. Childhood flavours and memories of the past are often achieved through inventive combinations of artisanal ingredients and traditional techniques. Examples of this include gingerbread, butter biscuit and cuberdon, a traditional cone-shaped chocolate (Wagralim, 2018, p.21).

²⁶ See p.8

It is also worth noting that the world of praline and chocolate is rich in powerful symbolism, and therefore capable of eliciting strong emotions, especially among young children. This awakening of the senses provokes a range of feelings and reactions among consumers, which are often conflicting.

For example, chocolate is generally appreciated because it is “sweet and silky”, but it is also perceived as “fatty and fattening”. This contradiction was also visible in way that panel members consume the product. While for some, chocolate is almost always bought to be shared, as a treat or as a gift, for others it has connotations of self-indulgence, or “forbidden pleasure”.

“Chocolate is directly linked to the seven deadly sins, both gluttony and greed. You want to keep all of the chocolates for yourself and try them all” says Anémone, aged 32.

We can therefore apply the principles of the yin and yang of advertising, developed by Daniel Solana (2014, p.2), to the world of chocolate and praline. The Yin is represented by the more self-centred, impulsive and “egotistical” side of consumption. Chocolate is the pleasure that transforms the individual and transports them into their own personal, private world. The Yang, meanwhile, it is represented by the sharing element. It makes a person or occasion feel special. It is therefore defined by conviviality, the pleasure of giving and its ceremonial nature. *“Chocolate is associated with the idea of introducing people to new things and impressing them with your knowledge of the best stores”*, explains one of the participants.

Finally, for consumers, pralines are associated with an element of surprise, discovery and mystery. Beneath the visible outer shell of chocolate, the praline within represents the unknown, which can only be discovered when you bite in. *“There are many different textures and flavours of praline. You never know what you’re going to get”*, explains Yunus.

All of the senses, tastes and emotions chocolate elicits in the consumer are, clearly, at the heart of their purchase motivations.

Riche and varied purchase motivations

Chocolate lovers are also aware of the wide range of factors surrounding this product. Indeed, they do not hesitate to splurge on an expert “**a master chocolatier**”, provided that they are a worthy representative of Belgian know-how and respect tradition while adding a touch of creativity. Packaging is also a key factor. With its ribbon, colours and sparkle, the refined ‘ballotin’ or giftbox is the “treasure chest” that gives the pralines within their value.

Brand perception also remains very important, especially among the expatriates interviewed. The visibility of the band is therefore highly significant, as is its international influence and presence in certain key locations (airports, stations, tourist sites). Among consumers in Brussels, there are marked differences between the young and the old.

The former are turning away from a market that is too static and traditional for their taste. They see Marcolini as an example for the industry, as he has helped the sector to evolve. Young people are more aware and more demanding with regards to ethical questions. The older generation, on the other hand, show greater respect for experience and tradition. There are also differences in terms of taste. Older people (aged over 55) have a preference for dark chocolate (51% said this was their favourite type of chocolate), while the younger generation (aged 18 to 34) tend to choose milk

chocolate (62% claiming that this is their favourite type of chocolate) (InSites Consulting, 2018, p. 5).

These two views are reflected in the market. On one hand, there is a traditional market, as exemplified by the household names. More often than not, this consists of the oldest brands, which are thought of as “classics”, such as Godiva, Leonidas, Neuhaus and Corné Port Royal. On the other hand, we are witnessing the arrival of a growing number of new experts and master chocolatiers, who put creativity centre stage. This new wave, this “wind of change and modernisation”, emerged with the arrival of Marcolini. The latter has opened up the market to a target audience that values novelty, while making consumers proud once again.

Expected changes

Brussels is the capital of Europe. According to those surveyed, it should therefore act as a showcase for chocolate, one of the main products associated with Belgium. Consumers therefore appreciate the fact that tourist itineraries highlight the city’s heritage and iconic districts, while helping visitors discover its chocolate. However, despite the recent revitalisation of the sector, newcomers to the chocolate industry are suffering from lack of exposure, market saturation and a race to the bottom caused by certain shops in the Grand-Place area. Some members of the focus group spoke of a need to **break free from the excessively tourist-focused vicious circle in which the chocolate industry is trapped**. We must assert the status of Brussels as a hub of chocolate expertise, while creating synergies between new stakeholders. It is also necessary to continue drawing on the spirit of adventure injected by Marcolini, so that chocolatiers step out of their comfort zone. In short, we must **break with convention**.

In general terms, consumers like trying and discovering new flavours and want chocolate tasting to be an experience. This experience could be the result of interesting combinations of flavours and textures in a single product (crispness, moistness, crunch, melt-in-the-mouth, tartness, etc.). There is also a marked interest in **new applications** of chocolate (used as a seasoning, in sauces, aperitifs, wines and beers). The range of possibilities is therefore vast (Wagralim, 2016, p.22). The people interviewed also focused on the concept of DIY (Do It Yourself).

In other words, the value of chocolate can be increased through teaching and learning. With this in mind, it is helpful to offer chocolate lovers the chance to create their own combinations. And why not make the surroundings brighter and more contemporary (in contrast with the classical baroque decor of the traditional chocolate shop), creating concept stores that appeal to all five senses.

Finally, **transparency** is the key. Unsurprisingly, consumers want greater transparency in terms of the provenance of cacao beans, the production process and the ingredients used.

2.4. In summary

Chocolate is our country's leading gastronomic specialty, and our expertise is renowned worldwide. Industry professionals agree unanimously: the sector has a strong heritage and we should be proud of it.

Beyond this pride, lies a rapidly changing sector. Consumption habits are changing, and product ranges are changing with them. Pralines and ballotins are becoming smaller, the choice of flavours is increasing and healthy and ethical chocolates are coming to the fore.

However, all is not well in the market. The number of chocolatiers is increasing year on year, leading to a certain degree of saturation. This causes a lack of visibility for tourists and consumers, and therefore businesses must reinvent themselves and find a niche.

External constraints are also pervasive. A lack of protection for artisans, lax standards for entry to the profession, AFSCA food safety standards and rising raw ingredient costs... it is becoming difficult for chocolatiers to deal with it all.

The sector is also marred by a lack of quality control. The term "Belgian chocolate" is still vaguely or poorly defined, which can damage its reputation.

Customers, meanwhile, still have a strong attachment to chocolate. Often associated with early childhood memories, chocolate is rich in symbolism and generates strong emotions in Belgians.

Their purchase motivations are manifold. While some consumers are strongly loyal to the traditional market, younger people are more aware and more demanding with regards to ethical questions. The new wave of evolution and modernity, which began after the arrival of Pierre Marcolini, has renewed the pride of Belgian consumers.

In general, consumers like to test and discover new flavours and want chocolate tasting to be an experience. They are interested in new uses (in seasonings, sauces, aperitifs, wines and beers) as well as the concept of DIY (Do It Yourself).

3. Becoming a chocolatier



This chapter aims, on one hand, to provide the keys to **launching your chocolate business in the Brussels-Capital Region**, by outlining the prerequisites for entering the profession and establishing your business (training, required qualifications, testimonies from our professionals, Business Plan and Financial Plan, legal statuses, choice of location, etc.) as well as highlighting some other essential factors to consider (fire regulations, insurance, commercial rent, waste collection, opening hours, council tax). On the other hand, it focuses on certain avenues to explore in order to **develop**, establish and personalise your project. We will look at the pivotal role of the internet and social media, key innovations in the sector, the opportunities presented by ethical chocolate and offer some advice on entering the export market.

3.1. Launch

Required qualifications

Training

No compulsory training is necessary. However, several *courses* are available in the Brussels-Capital Region, which we list below, according to education network and course type.

French-language education

Full time :

- **Chocolate, confectionery and ice cream:** seventh year of technical or vocational education, subject to passing the sixth year and holding a CQ 6 (higher secondary certificate) in bakery and patisserie, hospitality or restaurant studies. Duration: one year, daytime
- **Bakery, Patisserie and chocolate shop management:** idem.

Sandwich course²⁷ (CEFA, article 49) :

- **Chocolate, confectionery and ice cream:** sandwich course including training within a business for young people aged 15 to 21 (see conditions on the SIEP website). Duration: two years, daytime.
- **Bakery, patisserie and chocolate shop management:** idem.

These courses lead to the following qualifications:

- CESS, Higher Secondary Education Certificate.
- CQ7, Certificate for Completion of the seventh year of Higher Secondary Education.

For further information, consult the SIEP²⁸ Chocolatier–confectioner job fact file.

²⁷Sandwich courses combine theoretical training in an education centre with practical training in a business.

²⁸<http://metiers.siep.be/metier/chocolatier-confiseur-chocolatiere-confiseuse/>

French-language small business training

Similar to IFAPME²⁹ in Wallonia and SYNTRA³⁰ in Flanders, the EFP³¹ (Uccle) is the training centre for small and medium enterprises in the Brussels Region. It is aimed at self employed workers, SMEs, microbusinesses and their employees. In collaboration with the SME Training Service (SFPME), a French Community Commission (COCOF) service, the **EFP offers two sandwich courses in the chocolate sector.**

- **Chocolatiers, confectioners and ice cream makers:** type: apprenticeship; aimed at 15 - 23 year olds who have completed at least two years of the first stage of secondary education. The course lasts three years. Daytime lessons take place every Friday for the first year. Apprenticeship certificate accredited by the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. This course enables graduates to work as an artisan chocolatier, confectioner or ice cream maker. Additional training in management is available, and is required in order to open your own business.
- **Confectionery and chocolate:** type: business management; for over 18s who have successfully completed four years of secondary education in the general, technical transition or technical qualification streams or the sixth year of vocational secondary education, or passed an entrance exam or apprenticeship certificate in a related profession; duration: two years; daytime or evening; diploma in business management accredited by the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, fulfilling the legal requirements of access to the profession. Certificate of basic knowledge of management This course enables graduates to open their own chocolate shop, confectionery or ice cream shop, or to work as an artisan.

The EFP offers two types of training in confectionery and chocolate: business management and apprenticeship. In 2017, 55 people were enrolled on this course, 23 of whom were in their final year. Of these, 13 obtained their diploma (compared to 17 in 2016). In order to obtain the diploma, you must first pass three modules (module A: certificate in management; module B: professional training [ongoing assessment throughout the year]; module C: final exam [final project, assessment by the independent training providers and an external professional]). With regards to the apprenticeship, this was only introduced in 2016, so figures are not yet available.

However, two general trends stand out: since 2010, the training centre has observed an enrolment “boom” in the business management department of the “food centre”. This can be explained by the renewed interest in bakery, restaurants and micro-breweries. However, enrolments on chocolate-making courses remain stable. What is more, this trend within the “food centre” seems to have been reversed for apprenticeships between 2012 and 2016.

²⁹A Public Interest Organisation (OIP) subsidised by Wallonia. The letters of the acronym stand for: Institut wallon de Formation en Alternance et des indépendants et Petites et Moyennes Entreprises (Walloon Institute for Dual Vocational Training for Small and Medium Enterprises).

³⁰ Vlaams Agentschap voor Ondernemingsvorming (the Flemish Agency for Entrepreneurial Training)

³¹SME Training Space.

This is due to the fact that prior to 2016, it was necessary to find an apprenticeship tutor in order to enrol with the EFP (EFP, 2018, p11,15).

More information is available in the EFP course descriptions for Chocolate, confectionery and ice cream (apprenticeship)³² and Confectionery and chocolate (business management).³³

French language adult education

The CERIA³⁴ runs a chocolate and confectionery course at Institut Roger Lambion (Anderlecht); secondary level; this is available as a daytime or evening course and lasts two to three years.

More details on the CERIA Chocolate and Confectionery³⁵ course page.

Flemish-language secondary education

Similar courses are available in the Flemish speaking regions.

Full time: Banketbakkerij-chocoladebewerking - Derde graad – BSO (confectionery, chocolate processing, seventh year of vocational secondary education), duration: one year.

Sandwich course: Chocolatier dual - Derde graad – BSO (classroom and workplace based training), duration: one year.

The entry requirements and resulting diplomas are similar to those for French-language courses, and are outlined on the website www.onderwijskiezer.be.

Courses run by Vlaams Agentschap voor Ondernemingsvorming

In the Brussels Capital Region, SYNTRA runs a two year “ambachtelijk.e chocoladebewerker.ster” (artisan chocolatier) course on the Uccle campus, as an evening course. This course is aimed at young people and adults who want to enter employment or self-employment within the sector.

More information is available on the ambachtelijk.e chocoladebewerker.ster course guide from SYNTRA³⁶.

³² <https://www.efp.be/formations/apprentissage-3/efp-1/chocolatier-confiseur-glacier.html>

³³ <https://www.efp.be/formations/chef-d-entreprise/efp-2/confiseur-chocolatier.html>

³⁴ Centre d'Enseignement et de Recherches des Industries Alimentaires et chimiques (Food and Chemical Industry Education and Research Centre).

³⁵ http://www.ceria.be/irl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7&Itemid=12

³⁶ https://www.syntrabrussel.be/opleidingen/horeca_en_toerisme/horeca_en_voeding/ambachtelijk_chocoladebewerker_avond_.html

Flemish-language adult education

Finally, in parallel with CERIA, CVO³⁷ COOVI³⁸ runs an adult training course entitled "Chocolade, ijs en suiker & marsepein" (chocolate, ice cream and marzipan) in Anderlecht. More information is available on the "Chocolade, ijs en suiker & marsepein" course page from COOVI CVO³⁹.

Private schools

Several private courses (with higher fees) in the field of chocolate making are available in the Brussels area. Notable examples include:

La Chocolate Academy, recently opened by Callebaut, in the village of Wieze, where the famous brand originated in 1911; known as the largest academy of a network of sixteen centres, located all over the world (from Mexico, to Canada, via Poland and China). More information available on the la Chocolate Academy Belgium⁴⁰ website.

The Belgian Chocolate School, situated in Anvers (Hoboken), is run by Chocolate World, a world-leading manufacturer of machinery, equipment and utensils for the chocolate industry. More information available on the Belgian Chocolate School⁴¹ website.

Art of Chocolate Belgian Masterclasses, located within the New Chocolate Museum in Brussels (33, rue du Lombard). More information is available on the Art of Chocolate Belgian Masterclasses website⁴².

CACAOLAB (Gand), which offers seminars and workshops. More information is available on the CACAOLAB website⁴³.

The Chocolate University, which runs week-long master classes in Bruges. More information is available on the Chocolate University website⁴⁴.

It is also worth mentioning the courses run by the Food Safety agency AFSCA, including one on labelling⁴⁵.

Finally, we must make it clear that these courses do not generally provide you with all of the required business management skills, as explained below in the "in practice" section.

³⁷ Centrum voor Volwassenenonderwijs.

³⁸ Centrum voor Onderricht en Opzoekingen der Voedings- en chemische Industrie.

³⁹ <http://www.cvocoovi.be/nl/opleidingen/chocolade-ijs-en-suiker-marsepein>

⁴⁰ <http://www.chocolate-academy.com/be/fr/1198>

⁴¹ <https://belgianchocolateschool.com/>

⁴² <https://artofchocolate.be/about-us>

⁴³ <http://www.cacaolab.be/>

⁴⁴ <http://chocolateuniversity.be/>

⁴⁵ <http://www.afsca.be/cva/formation/etiquetage/>

Required qualifications/permits

No specific qualifications are required to work as a chocolatier. However, Brussels Economy and Employment⁴⁶ states that all entrepreneurs wishing to register a retail SME with the BCE (Belgian Business Register), must prove they have knowledge of management. In the chocolate industry, unlike other professions (eg. baker-pâtissier, restaurateur, délicatessen), no further proof of “professional skills” is required.

This knowledge of management includes skills such as entrepreneurship, an understanding of legal matters, accounts, taxation, business management, etc. (article 6 of the royal decree of 21/10/1998). The decree provides for certain exceptions (for example, transfer of an existing business for less than one year, surviving spouses and children of the business owners, etc.).

If the company is a **natural person**, the future company director must prove his/her knowledge, or, if this is not possible, those of his/her spouse, legal cohabitant, partner, permanent employee or self-employed assistant⁴⁷.

If the company is a **legal entity**, this is the natural person responsible for its day-to-day management (member of the body organised to represent the company⁴⁸ or permanent member of staff).

There are three ways of proving your knowledge:

- A diploma or qualification, as defined in article 7 of the royal decree of 21/10/1998;
- Sufficient professional experience in the last fifteen years (see article 8 of the same decree);
- Passing a managerial knowledge exam organised by the central exam board.

Accredited business advice offices can help you assess your managerial knowledge.

Varied experiences of training

The educational backgrounds of our interviewees were fairly diverse, as was their *feedback* on the subject. From family businesses to self-guided study, via participation in competitions, each profile is *unique*. Each individual followed their own path. At a time when subsidies for new business were still in their infancy, many of our participants took matters into their own hands.

Frédéric Blondeel, for instance, comes from a family of coffee roasters and taught himself the skills of cacao roasting and chocolate making.

Pierre Ledent, meanwhile, comes from a family of bakers and pâtissiers, but went on to teach himself by participating in numerous fairs and competitions, with the guidance of various bodies (AWEX, Sofinex, AFSCA courses). In terms of management, he uses the services of an accountant (once a year).

⁴⁶ http://werk-economie-emploi.brussels/fr_FR/alimentation

⁴⁷ First, second or third-degree relative of the company director, who submits a declaration from a social security fund for self-employed workers proving that he/she is a self-employed assistant to the company director.

⁴⁸ Manager (SPRL), Managing Director (SA), etc.

Valérie Goossens (Neuhaus) took over two shops from her father and continues to develop them. She is supported by an accountant and solicitor, when necessary. She has 18 years of business experience (advertising and marketing) and took a course with the AFSCA. In her opinion, *“above all, you need good managerial skills, you must know how to run your business”*.

Laurent Gerbaud completed a CERIA course alongside his studies in history.

Vanessa Renard has a university degree in Management Science, specialising in marketing (IAG ; UCL). She worked as a Product Manager for Intermarché, then in the BNP Paribas Fortis marketing department. A course in herbalism (at the ESP) taught her about different medicinal plants, knowledge which she has applied in her business, combining chocolate with various herbal ingredients). She completed a chocolate-making course with the EFP and plans to take the AFSCA course on packaging.

Jean-Philippe Darcis is a trained baker and patissier and self-taught chocolatier.

Bjorn Becker (Mike & Becky), who specialises in *bean-to-bar*, studied political science and worked in foreign trade within the European institutions. His wife completed an online course with Vancouver-based Ecole du Chocolat. He sings the praises of Youtube and the *bean-to-bar* community, which *“were very useful tools”*.

Pascal Chanson, son of a restaurateur, completed a course at the l’EFP (bakery-pâtisserie), before going on to become a member of the school board himself.

Antoine Corné also comes from a long line of chocolatiers. He has a degree (in marketing) from Ephec and has taken courses at the Chocolate Museum (practical) and the UCM (labelling and sales).

Pierre Marcolini studied at CERIA, at a time when the school was world renowned, which, he believes, is no longer the case. He has been working in the chocolate industry since 1995.

Philippe Lafont has been teaching chocolate making and pâtisserie at the EFP since 1986 alongside his work as a chocolatier - an activity that he has recently returned to after a break of several years. He also trained at the EFP and sells his creations at markets, from a *“choco-truck”*.

Widespread criticism

Those interviewed were generally critical of the conventional chocolate making courses available in Belgium, and tell of difficult experiences with hiring staff.

Frédéric Blondeel notes that, *“the chocolate making courses available are not rigorous enough.”* He believes, for example, that learners have major gaps in their knowledge of ingredients and the subtle differences between different products. According to Jean-Philippe Darcis:

According to Jean-Philippe Darcis :

*Today, there are no true chocolate making courses; the courses on offer just teach you to make pralines. **They don't teach you to make chocolate.** It's quite ambiguous and paradoxical. It is not enough just to study; in fact, it counts for very little- what matters is entrepreneurial spirit.* (Interview, May 2018)

Vanessa Renard agrees that, *“ too many aspects are not covered”*, citing a lack of training in recycled packaging, window dressing and the use of air conditioning as examples. She chose the EFP due to timetables and transport. She believes that *“some teachers are more active than others in the sector and there are also differences in terms of machinery”*.

According to Laurent Gerbaud :

We need a much better standard of training; chocolate making courses play second fiddle. They are a poor sibling to patisserie courses. The techniques are not very complex. The quality of courses is highly dependent on the teacher. (Interview, 2018)

According to Pierre Marcolini :

The courses available today are catastrophic (with the exception of a few teachers), and suffer from a lack of proper equipment. What's more, the fact that the profession has no entry requirements makes the diploma less important. There should be a greater focus on bean-to-bar and better teaching equipment. (Interview, September 2018)

According to Philippe Lafont, the EFP – where he teaches- is, however *“very well-considered in the world of chocolate and patisserie”*. In terms of equipment, the school has benefited from the contributions of Mr Lafont and Mr Marcolini. *“Evidently, we're a long way from the very costly high-performance equipment used in commercial settings, but for training purposes, it's not bad.”* In terms of course content, it is, in reality, *“closer to the trade of ‘pralinier’, or praline maker, as we start with large bars of chocolate.”* On the subject of *bean-to-bar*, Philippe Lafont believes that, *“we must explain and educate people, as few of them know what it means.”* Finally, according to Pascal Chanson, *“the audience [of these courses] is complicated and not always passionate.”*

In terms of human resources management, the outlook is not always positive. Jean- Philippe Darcis says that he has *“no worries about finding staff for the chocolate shop”*, but finds it harder to find managers, as he is a baker and patissier by trade. He also highlighted the financial aspect of the business: *“it is not the manufacturing that is difficult, but achieving the necessary volume of customers.”*

Frédéric Blondeel is more puzzled, admitting that *“the biggest difficulty is human resources management, and this is doubly true of the younger generation.”* Pascal Chanson believes that *“it is very hard to find quality staff”*, while Bjorn Becker sees this as the result of *“an excessive burden of taxation.”*

Business Plan/Financial Plan

In order to formulate a strategy and communicate this to the relevant support agencies, would-be entrepreneurs must clearly define their project and put this down on paper, by means of a business plan and financial plan. In order to do so, it is useful to consult the MyBusinessPlan⁴⁹ page from 1819, which offers a useful guide to drawing up these plans. It is also advisable to contact the not-for-profit ILES⁵⁰ or a local economy office⁵¹ in order to refine your plans and assess their viability.

Once this step is completed, the open/retail division of hub.brussels (formerly Atrium.brussels) helps future entrepreneurs devise a startup strategy and offers online support via the Wikipreneurs⁵² platform, where you can download business and financial plans.

As a guide, in order to open a modestly-sized boutique and workshop, you should budget approximately 28,000 euros (including VAT) for large **equipment** (around 12,000 euros for a 24 kg automatic tempering machine required to create the finished product; around 6,000 euros for an enrobing machine with conveyor; a little over 1,500 euros for a refrigerated table; approximately 8,500 euros for air conditioning); around 4,000 euros for small equipment (utensils such as conical strainers, piping bags, sieves, bowls, moulds, scales etc.); around 8,000 euros for fitting out the workshop (flooring, painting, shelving, table, sink, etc.); around 10,000 euros for shopfitting (counter, furniture, glass/steel partitions, signage, logo etc.).

In addition to this, the financial plan must account for business registration fees (the planning application drawn up by an architect can cost around 5,000 euros including VAT); intangible assets (website, logo); the rental deposit; potential purchase of property/land; construction, renovation or repurposing of buildings; stock (raw materials, packaging, etc.); launch costs (advertising, events, etc.); cashflow, etc.

The amounts above are provided as an example, and may vary according to the planned size of the project.

⁴⁹ <https://1819.monbusinessplan.be/main/>

⁵⁰ <http://www.iles.be/>

⁵¹ <https://www.1819.brussels/fr/les-quichets-deconomie-locale-de-la-region-de-bruxelles-capitale>

⁵² <https://atrium.wikipreneurs.com/>

Establishing your business

Legal company statuses

Before launching your business, it is essential to ask yourself which is the most appropriate legal status. Prospective entrepreneurs can choose to operate as a “sole trader” or “natural person”, or found a company. Each of these legal statuses has its own advantages and disadvantages.

Sole trader

Sole traders do not need to create a legal entity. They can begin trading immediately.

In administrative terms, the formalities are simplified, as are the operational requirements (no double-entry bookkeeping, no AGM, no filing of annual accounts, etc.)

The sole trader is the sole decision-maker, but can surround him or herself with “assistants” (family) or employees.

However, his or her liability is unlimited: personal and professional property are not separated, and therefore this property acts as security for professional debts.

It is worth noting that since 8 June 2007 (act pertaining to various provisions), sole traders have been able- under certain conditions- to protect their habitual place of residence, by having it declared exempt from repossession.

Company

The company- or legal person- is a legal entity founded by one or more people who decide to invest a share of their capital in the business.

	Natural person	Limited liability company (SA, SPRL, SC)
Registration costs	Business No (BCE) €87.00	Notary: approx. €900 Compulsory financial plan Business No (BCE) €87.00
Capital	No minimum capital investment.	Legally established minimum capital depending on company type (SA: €61,500, SPRL and SC €18,550)
Liability	Unlimited – No distinction between personal and business property Possible exception of home from repossession	Limited to subscribed capital. Separation of personal and business property
Tax and social security contributions	IPP (income tax for natural persons) between 25 and 50% + social security contributions calculated on the basis of turnover minus professional expenses	IPP (income tax for natural persons) between 25 and 50% + social security contributions calculated on the basis of the salary of the managing director ISOC (corporation tax) of 29% (or 20% at reduced rate) on company profits.

The trading company is therefore a legal entity in its own right. It is a separate entity from the individuals of which it is composed. It can take various forms, each with their own conditions, as summarised in the table below, published on the UCM⁵³ website.

	SA – Public Limited Company	SPRL – Private Limited Company	SPRLU – Single-person Private Limited Company	SC – Limited liability cooperative	SCRI – Unlimited liability cooperative
Partners	Minimum 2	Minimum 2	1	Minimum 3	Minimum 3
Minimum capital	61.500€	18.550€	18.550€	18.550€	Free to choose
Paid-up capital	1/4 with a minimum of 61.500€	1/5 with a minimum of 6.200€	1/5 with a minimum of 12.400€	1/4 with a minimum of 6.200€	
Contribut. in kind	Auditor's report	Auditor's report	Auditor's report	Auditor's report	No specific regulations
Financial plan	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Not compulsory

Unlike sole traders, companies can- depending on the legal status chosen- separate personal and professional property, and liability can therefore be limited to the capital subscribed. The UCM website also offers an interesting comparison table on this subject.

New Code on Companies

It should be noted that the new Code on Companies and Associations (CSA) was adopted by the Chamber on 28 February 2019 and came into force on 1 May 2019. This applies to all new companies, foundations and associations. Existing companies, foundations and associations must alter their articles of incorporation in line with the new law on companies by 1 January 2024.

However, they may request to be subject to the new code from 1 May, altering their articles of incorporation accordingly. Whatever decision they make, they are bound to respect the mandatory provisions of the new regulations and the non-mandatory provisions, save those to which their articles of incorporation make an exception, from 1 January 2020⁵⁴.

⁵³ <https://www.ucm.be/Starter-et-independent/J-ai-un-projet/Creation-d-entreprise-J-exerce-en-personne-physique-ou-en-societe>

⁵⁴ <https://www.bdo.be/fr-be/actualites/2019/le-nouveau-code-des-societes-et-des-associations-est-desormais-une-realite>

The main changes include :

- The fact that all economically-active natural persons and legal entities, including not-for-profits and liberal professionals, are considered to be companies (the only exception being associations de fait- unincorporated associations- provided that they do not generate a profit). As a result, they must register with the BCE (Belgian Companies Register).
- **A drastic reduction in the number of company statuses** (from 17 to 9), the most common being the société anonyme (SA- public limited company), the société à responsabilité limitée (SRL- Limited liability company), the société coopérative (SC- cooperative company) and the société simple (simple partnership).
- **The concept of social capital disappears for SRLs and SCs, while in the past the founders were required to provide minimum capital of 18,550 euros.** For SRLs, which become the basic company status, financial plans must be more detailed.
- **SRLs & SAs can be founded by a single natural person or legal entity.** Simple partnerships require at least two founders. Cooperative companies require at least three founders.
- In a SS (Simple partnership), partners have unlimited liability, while in SRLs, SAs and SCs, liability is limited to the amount contributed by the shareholder.

More information is available on the 1819⁵⁵ website, including a brochure published by the FEB (Federation of Belgian Enterprises), Graydon and Fednot on the subject.

A convenient establishment

The 1819⁵⁶ helpline and website are your first port of call, providing initial information for prospective entrepreneurs in the Brussels-Capital Region. This free service can guide you take the first steps towards finding a premises. An advisor will provide information on databases and services you may wish to access, in particular within hub.brussels

Finding a premises

It is useful to contact the following services:

- **Inventimmo⁵⁷**: this database enables you to search available commercial property.
- **The retail division of hub.brussels** (formerly Atrium), also helps entrepreneurs identify the right district, using numerous geomarketing indicators. hub.brussels advisors have excellent knowledge of the market and footfall in the various streets and districts. Contact: open@hub.brussels
- **The municipal land management agencies**: There are seven ordinary land management agencies and four autonomous agencies in the Brussels-Capital Region. These are listed on the local.brussels municipal land registry website⁵⁸.

⁵⁵ <https://www.1819.brussels/fr/blog/brochure-feb-graydon-et-fednot-le-nouveau-code-des-societes-et-associations>;

See also, the information available on the following websites: <https://www.ucm.be/Starter-et-independant/Pages-libres/Reforme-du-droit-des-societes-et-des-associations>; <https://www.bdo.be/fr-be/actualites/2019/le-nouveau-code-des-societes-et-des-associations-est-desormais-une-realite>; <http://www.fdmexpertise.be/2018/09/11/nouveau-code-des-societes-15-reformes-que-vous-devez-connaître/>

⁵⁶ <https://www.1819.brussels/fr>

⁵⁷ <http://www.citydev.brussels/immobilierbruxelles/inventimmo.asp>

⁵⁸ <http://pouvoirs-locaux.brussels/acteurs/les-regies-communales>

- **Estate agents:** the Professional Institute of Estate Agents (IPI)⁵⁹ provides a list of accredited estate agents in each region, who can help you find the perfect location.

Please note: none of these intermediaries provides information on the use of the property, as stated on the existing planning permission (see *following page*).

When looking for a location, it is important to take into account the land use plan, be this on a regional or municipal level.

- **Regional land use plan (PRAS):** this plan divides land in the Brussels region into different zones (mixed zone, residential zone, urban industrial zone, etc.). For each zone type, it establishes the number of m² that may be authorised for each use (housing, retail, offices, etc.). For example, in a mixed zone, outside the borders of a retail hub, the maximum floorspace for a shop is 200 m², or 1000 m² under certain conditions.

When looking for a new business location, or considering extension, is therefore important to check which zones permit this activity.

So, how do you determine which PRAS zone a given address falls within? By searching the map on the BrugGIS⁶⁰ website. To find out more about current PRAS requirements, visit the regional planning website⁶¹.

Good to know: there are no exemptions from the PRAS.

- **Specific land use plans (PPAS):** In certain districts, the municipal authorities have adopted specific land use plans (PPAS). These plans also contain prescriptions on the various activities that are authorised, and, on the contrary, those which are not. The Brugis website enables you to see which business types are affected. For further information on the content of a PPAS, it is useful to consult the website of the municipal authority or visit the relevant municipal planning office.

Permits

Before choosing a location, it is advisable to visit the municipal planning office to check what type of planning permission is required for the chosen premises. You must respect existing legislation by obtaining planning permission (often required), in addition to an environmental permit in certain cases. hub.brussels offers a specialised planning service. Contact: permit@hub.brussels.

- **Urban planning permits**

Planning permission is solely associated with the property and not the person using it. It is valid *indefinitely*, excluding some exceptions such as signage (maximum of nine years).

Consequently, new business owners must check whether the property in question already has planning permission for the intended use and research the requirements for any changes they intend to make, in addition to any “liabilities” in terms of historic planning infringements.

⁵⁹ <https://www.ipi.be/>

⁶⁰ <https://mybrugis.irisnet.be/brugis/#/>

⁶¹ <https://urbanisme.irisnet.be/lesreglesdujeu/les-plans-daffectation-du-sol/le-plan-regional-daffectation-du-sol-pras>

To summarise the essence of the Code Bruxellois de l'Aménagement du Territoire (CoBAT- Brussels Land Management Code, article 98), planning permission is required under the following circumstances:

- Construction and renovation works and internal **layout changes** that affect the **external** load-bearing structure (chimneys, canopies, shutters, external paintwork, etc.).
- Changes of **use** (a shop converted into a snack bar, for example) (decree regarding changes of use requiring planning permission, 2002) or **purpose** of the premises (a workshop converted into a retail unit, for example).

Some planning exemptions exist, for example for works with “minimal impact”.⁶² In the case of a chocolate shop, permission for change of use is not required if the premises is already used as a retail unit and has the appropriate “retail” planning permission. Please note, other modifications, such as the addition of a sign or canopy may require permission.

If you plan to open a **workshop**, this may require planning permission.

Permits are- without exception- issued by the municipal authorities. For all information, consult the municipal planning authorities or the urbanisme.brussels⁶³ website, which details all procedures and provides links to the websites of each municipality. A free practical guide was also published by Brussels Urban Development in October 2016⁶⁴. Be aware that there are plans to change the process between April and September 2019⁶⁵.

Preparing your application can take over a month (drawing up plans, identifying irregularities, etc.). Then, once the application has been submitted, the municipal authorities have 30 days to ensure that it is complete (acknowledgement of receipt confirming that the application is complete or listing the missing documents). If the file is complete, processing times vary depending on the type of application (from 45 to 120 days, depending on the complexity of the process).

Top tip: find a premises that already has appropriate planning permission for your business!

⁶² List of works exempted from planning permission or for which the Government established simplified processes in [the decree of 13 November 2008, known as the decree on “minimal impact”](#).

⁶³ <http://urbanisme.irisnet.be/lepermisdurbanisme>

⁶⁴ Available on the urbanisme.brussels website: <https://urbanisme.irisnet.be/publications/publications-1/guide-pratique-du-permis-durbanisme-en-rbc>

⁶⁵ <http://urbanisme.irisnet.be/actualites-accueil/ordonnance-du-4-avril-2019-modifiant-lordonnance-du-30-novembre-2017-reformant-le-code-bruxellois-de-lamenagement-du-territoire-cobat-et-lordonnance-du-5-juin-1997-relative-aux-permis-denvironnement-ope-et-modifiant-certaines-legislations-connexes-1>

– **Environmental permit**

Practically all businesses require an environmental permit. This includes chocolate workshops. The Order of 5 June 1997 lists activities, equipment and products according to their potential impact on the environment and surrounding area. Such facilities (around 200) are therefore required to have a permit or declaration. There are several classes: from the least dangerous, class 3, to the most dangerous, class 1A.

A simple chocolate shop does not usually require an environmental permit unless it has an air conditioning unit or refrigerator above a given size. An advance environmental declaration will be required. However, the addition of a workshop will necessitate a class 2 or class 1B permit⁶⁶.

Depending on the circumstances, permits are issued by the municipal authority or by Brussels Environnement, who can provide you with any necessary information; it is also useful to consult the [administrative guide](#) published online by Bruxelles Environnement ⁶⁷.

Processing times vary depending on the permit type requested. Information is available in the “administrative guide”. In short, you should allow approximately twenty days for a simple declaration (class 3), and around 60 days between submission of the completed application file (it may take several weeks to collect all documents required for the application) and issuance of a classified permit.

Fees also vary, according to the class of permit sought and the municipality

It should be noted that the environmental permit is attached to both the property and its operator and generally lasts for a maximum of fifteen years.

Financial support

A series of tools are available to help you find the resources needed to buy, rent or convert a premises.

Some attractive **finance options** are available: loans with generous terms, possible capital increases, guarantees facilitating access to conventional bank loans, etc. More information is available at <https://www.1819.brussels/fr/financement-de-lentreprise>

There are also **subsidies** provided by various public authorities to help prospective entrepreneurs launch their business.

- **L’aide régionale aux investissements généraux** (Regional support for general investments): this regional government subsidy is specifically for new investments and can be accessed by any Brussels-based SME, with the exception of certain sectors (finance, property, healthcare, education, charity sector, etc.). The eligibility criteria are outlined on the “aide régionale aux investissements généraux” page of the 1819⁶⁸ site.

⁶⁶ See full list: http://app.bruxellesenvironnement.be/listes/?nr_list=IC_LIST

⁶⁷ <https://environnement.brussels/le-permis-denvironnement/le-guide-administratif/>

⁶⁸ <https://www.1819.brussels/fr/subsides/aide-aux-investissements-generaux-materiel-immobilier-et-investissements-incorporels>

- **L'aide à la consultance** (*Consultancy support*): this can cover up to 50% of costs such as a marketing campaign or feasibility survey. More details are available on the "aide à la consultance" page of the 1819⁶⁹ site and the Consultancy page of the Brussels Economy and Employment site⁷⁰.
- **Environmental subsidies**: for an overview of all available environmental incentives, visit the subsidies page of the 1819⁷¹ site and the environmental investments page of the Brussels Economy and Employment site⁷².
- **Crowdfunding**: these participatory finance platforms can be used to raise funds for an entrepreneurial project.
- **The OpenSoon project**: retailers setting up in Brussels that meet certain conditions can apply for funding to help with renovation work and a startup bonus. For more details, visit the OpenSoon page from Brussels Economy and Employment⁷³.

To help you better identify the subsidies and funding solutions available for your project, the ecosubsibru⁷⁴ page and the BruPart loans page on the 1819⁷⁵ website are interesting on several fronts.

Afsca

As a business operating in the food industry and a processor of food products, you must be registered with the Afsca (the Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain) and hold a permit⁷⁶.

The premises used for your chocolate business must comply with food hygiene regulations. The AFSCA website⁷⁷ details these regulations according to business type.

The self-checking guide⁷⁸ for bakeries and patisseries, which includes chocolate businesses⁷⁹, also provides the necessary information. The not-for-profit Brufotec⁸⁰ can also assist you in implementing and monitoring these standards.

Pedestrian footfall in Brussels

When you think shopping streets and districts, you immediately think of shoppers on foot. hub.brussels has therefore decided to include a brief overview of the shopping streets with the highest daily pedestrian footfall (see Figure 11). This is a major factor that future chocolatiers must take into account when determining their business model and choosing a location.

⁶⁹ <http://www.1819.be/fr/subsides/aide-la-consultance-conseils-exterieurs>

⁷⁰ http://werk-economie-emploi.brussels/fr_FR/consultance

⁷¹ https://www.1819.brussels/fr/ecosubsibru/filter?field_subsidy_project_tid=3670&field_subsidy_type_tid=All&field_subsidy_level_tid=All

⁷² http://werk-economie-emploi.brussels/fr_FR/web/aee/investissements-environnementaux

⁷³ http://werk-economie-emploi.brussels/fr_FR/opensoon-2019

⁷⁴ <https://www.1819.brussels/fr/ecosubsibru/subsidies/>

⁷⁵ <https://www.1819.brussels/fr/financement-de-lentreprise/les-credits/les-credits-de-brupart>

⁷⁶ <http://www.afsca.be/professionnels/agrements/demande/>

⁷⁷ <http://www.afsca.be/professionnels/contact/ulc/bruxelles.asp>

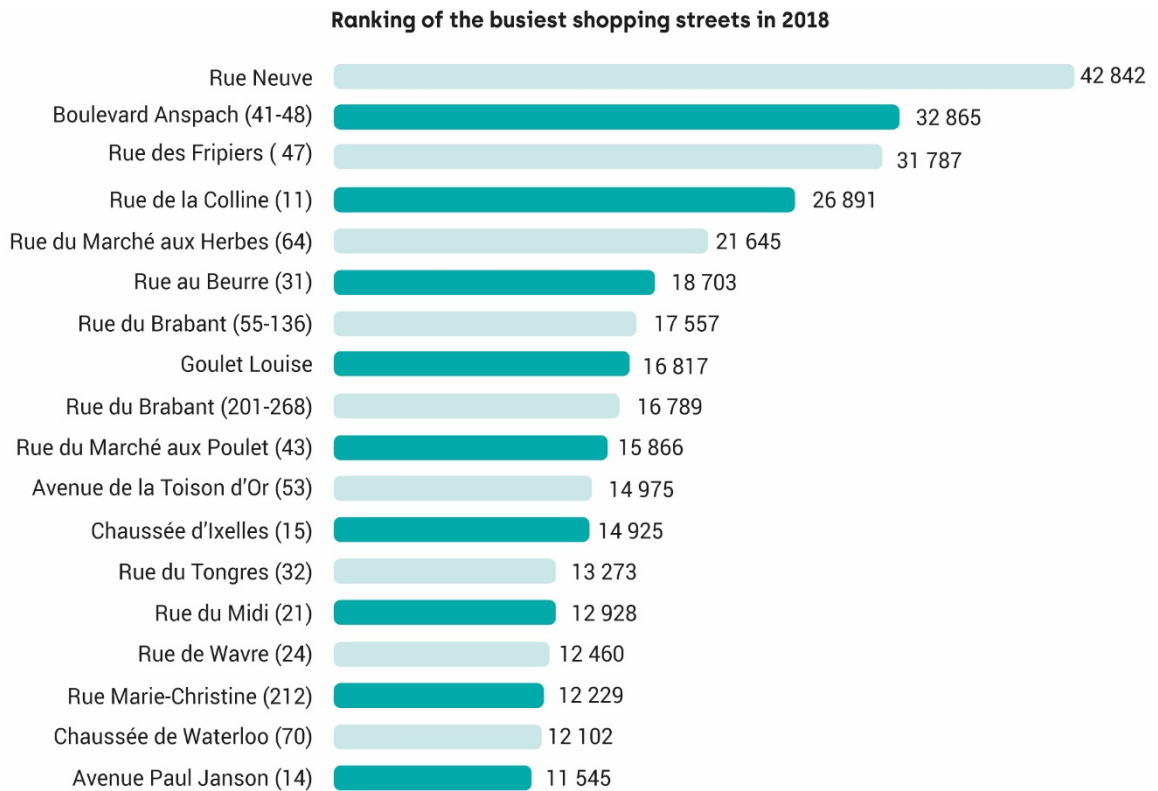
⁷⁸ http://www.afsca.be/autocontrole-fr/guides/distribution/g026/_documents/G-026_V2_FR_18-06-2013.pdf

⁷⁹ Choprabisco, (2013). *Self-checking Guide for the biscuit, chocolate, praline, confectionary and breakfast cereal industry*. Coordinated by Liesbeth Jacxens of the University of Gand. Choprabisco, Brussels.

However, beyond the first 25 pages, non-members of Choprabisco must pay for this guide.

⁸⁰ www.brufotec.be

FIGURE 11



For a fuller and more detailed insight, please consult the 2018 barometer, available here: <http://analytics.brussels>

The right location is not always obvious

Among the chocolatiers we interviewed, experiences and advice on the subject of location varied significantly. Vanessa Renard, for instance, initially tried *co-working*, but ultimately found that this was not “a good option”, based on the fact that it is “hard to find an artisan willing to rent their space.”

She then opted for a boutique with an open workshop “in order to showcase the work of an artisan chocolatier, to be more accessible to customers and to generate loyalty by offering tastings and organising group chocolate workshops.”

This is located in Etterbeek, close to place Saint-Pierre. The family of Antoine Corné, meanwhile, chose Woluwé-Saint-Lambert shopping centre due to its “strong buying power”, noting in passing that Sablon is “too expensive”.

As for Frédéric Blondeel, he relocated to Koekelberg, having searched in vain for a workshop of over 250 m² in the City of Brussels, which is no longer permitted under the land use plan.

According to Johan Domas-Conzemius, CEO of Guérin-Boutron, “commercial rents in Brussels are too high”. This opinion is shared by Jean-Philippe Darcis, who says, “rents are high and its hard to make a profit.” He says he has lost a lot of money in Brussels.

Finally, Jean-Philippe Darcis believes that the choice of location is mainly *“a question of feeling and market research. You must surround yourself with people who know the district”*, while Philippe de Selliers (CEO of Leonidas) considers the choice of location *“essential”*. For this reason, he consults estate agents, who keep him informed of how certain streets are changing.

Standards, heavy taxes and ineffective support

One of the main difficulties these chocolatiers face is a lack of support from the political sphere, often coupled with a heavy tax burden. According to Frédéric Blondeel, *“artisans are not protected by the politicians. Social security contributions are far too high for artisans. A specific status should be created”*. However, the latter does feel, *“supported by the municipal authorities in Koekelberg, who do a lot for local business...particularly in terms of exposure (municipal newspapers).”*

We hear the same story from Pascal Chanson, who would like to *“see a reduction in tax”* and Valérie Goossens, for whom *“the biggest challenge is improving our turnover, because social security contributions are so high.”* According to Laurent Gerbaud, *“the authorities should consider chocolatiers as a kind of tourist attraction, as they do with other types of business. As such, we should be entitled to fiscal benefits. The taxes need to be lower.”*

Meanwhile, Johan Domas-Conzemius (Guérin-Boutron), also highlights a lack of political support, saying that while he received advice from Hospitality.brussels when applying for a subsidy (consultancy and investment support), he generally prefers to work independently of the major administrative structures.

Jean-Philippe Darcis believes that, *“there are already too many support structures”*, and that *“people who want to create something must cope by themselves.”* Finally, as we mentioned in the previous chapter, the AFSCA regulations are often criticised, notably by Antoine Corné, who highlights *“increasingly stringent demands in terms of listings and labels”*, and Pascal Chanson, who notes that *“the standards are increasingly hard to meet.”*

Don't forget

SIAMU Certificate (fire service)

Any establishment open to the public with a floorspace of over 50 m² requires a SIAMU certificate. We advise you to contact the fire prevention service for more information on the steps to take, according to the premises and business type.

Siamu fire prevention service
Avenue de l'Héliport, 11-15
1000 Brussels
email: info@firebru.brussels
02/208 84 30

As there is a fee for the fire safety inspection (approximately €150), it is a good idea to use an accredited body to make any changes requested at the first visit, in order to remove the need for a second visit to inspect these changes. In this way, you can simply send proof of completion of the requested modifications to SIAMU and avoid paying the fee again.

Insurance

As a self-employed entrepreneur, you must take out insurance against unforeseen circumstances (illness, fire, workplace accidents, etc.). Certain types of insurance are compulsory, others are recommended.

Compulsory insurance

- Civil liability in case of fire or explosion (strict liability): for any premises open to the public, the entrepreneur is liable for personal injury or material damage caused to third parties.
- Third party motor vehicle insurance
- Workplace accident: compulsory insurance is required to cover workers in the case of an accident when carrying out their role, in the workplace or on the journey to or from work.
- Professional insurance: not compulsory for a chocolate business, but strongly recommended, this insurance covers damages resulting from professional negligence.

More details are available on the insurance page on the 1819⁸¹ website.

Other insurance

A wide range of other insurance options are available, including property insurance, which protects business property (“insurance for loss of operational capacity”, which covers the property damaged and the impact of the incident on operations) and personal insurance (life insurance, disablement insurance, guaranteed income insurance, etc.).

Faced with this complex array of choices, it is often beneficial to use an accredited insurance broker, in order to pinpoint your needs and avoid unnecessary expense.

For more information, consult the Assuralia⁸² and Feprabel⁸³ websites.

Commercial leases

“The rental of a property principally for use as a retail or artisan business by a lessee or sub-lessee in direct contact with the public ” is governed by the law of 30 April 1951 on commercial leases. Duration: nine years minimum Compulsory registration Option to terminate every three years.

More information is available on the commercial leases page of the 1819⁸⁴ website.

⁸¹ <https://www.1819.brussels/fr/assurances-fiscalite-comptabilite/assurances/les-assurances-pas-seulement-obligatoires-essentielles>

⁸² <https://www.assuralia.be/nl/>

⁸³ <https://www.feprabel.be/>

⁸⁴ <https://www.1819.brussels/fr/implantation-obligations/obligations/le-bail-commercial-quoi-faut-il-faire-attention>

Waste collection contract

You must enter into a commercial waste collection contract with Bruxelles-Propreté (or another accredited private operator).

Bruxelles-Propreté
Avenue de Broqueville, 12 - 1150 Brussels
Info: 0800.98181
www.bruxelles-proprete.be

Opening hours

In order to ensure that all business owners have a weekly rest period, the law on opening hours (2006) requires all shops to close for an uninterrupted 24h period (beginning at 05:00 or 13:00), without exceptions. By default, the day of rest is Sunday. Authorisation to close on a day other than Sunday is subject to the decision of the Board of Mayor and Aldermen of the municipality in which you operate. The chosen day must be displayed in the shop window.

Municipal taxes

Each municipality sets its own taxes. It is advisable to contact the business department of the municipality in which you operate or plan to operate for more information on the relevant taxes.

3.2. Grow

Develop an online presence

Today, consumers are constantly online, anywhere, at any time, using a wide range of devices. The internet is not only an important source of information, but also a retail goldmine (Van Damme, 2017). However, chocolatiers and chocolate retailers can sometimes be hesitant in terms of online shopping and using social media to increase their visibility and reputation.

A shift towards online shopping?

E-commerce continues to grow in our country: Belgian consumers spent over ten billion euros online in 2017 (+10.4 % against 2016). 86.5 million online purchases were made by 8.4 million Belgian citizens over the course of the year (Boelen, 2018).

It is worth noting that online shopping accounts for 17% of all spending in Belgium. While the most popular category remains “plane tickets and accommodation” (separate), accounting for 86% of online expenditure, **there has been a large increase in the amount spent on food, which grew by 27% between 2016 and 2017.**

Within this category, pralines hold their own. Indeed, according to a survey of online shopping habits by Comeos, 9% of shoppers who bought pralines in 2018 did so online. Of these, 16% bought pralines over once a month. What is more, 10% of consumers would be prepared to buy more pralines in the future, and 6% considerably more (Comeos, 2018, p 46; 49; 53).

However, over two thirds of online purchases made in Belgium are from foreign websites (22% from Belgian sites, 63% from EU-based online stores and 15% from online stores based outside the EU) (Retis, 2018).

It is also very difficult to find Belgian online retailers that stand out from the crowd. In 2015, Damien Jacob, e-commerce consultant and course leader at various institutions including HEC Liège, analysed this situation as follows: μ

Unlike in France, where e-commerce is, in part, driven by a rejection of monopolies and hypermarkets, Belgium has a great network of small businesses. Secondly, Belgium is not at all nationalist in its shopping habits, which benefits French and Dutch online retailers! But these two factors do not explain the lack of ambition in terms of e-commerce, which is largely inexplicable (Fabes, 2015).

Looking specifically at the chocolate industry, while several companies, including both household names (Leonidas, Neuhaus, Godiva, Galler, Marcolini, etc.) and smaller brands (Benoit Nihant, Jean-Phillipe Darcis, Zaabär, etc.), have already explored this sales channel, many are yet to create an online shop.

For some, this decision is the result of costs and staff shortages, while others still have many questions to resolve before taking this step. *“It’s undeniable, e-commerce is a significant new sales channel. It is one of the great challenges of our times. With chocolate, you must be able to sell without compromising quality”,* explains Antoine Corné. Aware of the significance of this new retail model, he plans to launch his own online store and deliver the products himself.

However, in his eyes, chocolate lovers are a group of consumers who still like to see the product, breathe in the aromas and touch the packaging, especially when it is bought as a gift. Like many of his colleagues, he believes that nothing will ever replace the boutique experience.

In general terms, it is also worth noting that in 2017, 35% of online purchases were made using mobile phones (Comeos, 2018, p.6), but only 13% of sites are optimised for mobiles (Verset, 2017). Furthermore, 76% of businesses that went bankrupt in 2016 did not have an online

presence, which once again highlights the importance of offering an online purchasing option. Pursuing this route therefore appears almost essential.

A social media presence is necessary

(In addition to the interviews carried out by hub.brussels, this section relies heavily on two studies: Médias Sociaux: comment raconter une histoire (Social Media: how to tell a story, Van Damme, 2017, p 42-43) and Boostez votre chocolaterie grâce au réseaux sociaux (Boost your chocolaterie using social media, Cheyns, 2017))

According to VLAM⁸⁵, 80% of Belgians have internet access and 70% use at least one social network. The average Belgian has three social media accounts. Therefore, we cannot underestimate the importance of social media and the impact of good online marketing.

It offers the opportunity to tell your story and establish your own marketing strategy. Speaking about your experience, your journey, your goals and the chocolate making process, using terms such as authenticity, craft, sustainability and Fairtrade helps make a good impression on consumers.

However, it is not always easy to find the time to maintain a social media presence, especially for small businesses. Antoine Corné, for example, says *his "sister takes care of marketing and social media. But we rely more on word of mouth- it's very important for our business. " "I have a small team that takes care of communication and marketing. We also post occasional surveys on Facebook. But generally, I lack the administrative structures to do this type of work", says Jean-Philippe Darcis. Meanwhile, Frédéric Blondeel has, for the first time in 20 years, has hired an external company to oversee this aspect of the business. "It's a full time job and I don't have the time to deal with everything that comes with social media."*

According to Valérie Goossens, who used to work in communication and marketing, the use of social media is essential. *"I use Facebook a lot for my Neuhaus and Lindt stores. It's important to generate excitement. A consumer also created a TripAdvisor for my store on rue du Luxembourg."*

Ultimately, using social media appears to be a *prerequisite* for new and future chocolatiers. Whether or not they use it, everyone acknowledged the growing importance of this type of media, especially in terms of visibility.

Overall, **Facebook remains the most widely used social network in the chocolate sector.** It enables easy two-way communication, creating a direct dialogue with the customer. It is also possible to generate interactions by posting surveys (eg. What is your favourite chocolate? What flavour would you like to see in our Christmas collection?), which helps generate customer interaction.

Following Facebook, Twitter remains the ideal place to get noticed by journalists and bloggers. *"Facebook is a sort of living room where you determine who can and can't enter. Twitter, on the other hand, is the online equivalent of a cafe, where anyone is free to come and go as they please",*

⁸⁵Vlaams Centrum Voor Agro-&Visserijmarketing

explains marketing consultant Philip Peeters, invited to chair a social media workshop organised by Choprabisco in February 2017.

Finally, Instagram and Pinterest are also useful channels.

The latter is essentially accessed via mobile and helps bring together users with shared passions. As for Pinterest, this highly popular mood board showcases emerging trends.

Make the most of constantly innovative sector

Pushing the limits of creativity, offering more sustainable and healthier options while responding to all dietary needs. These are some of the major challenges facing today's food industry. For several years now, food and technology (referred to collectively as *FoodTech*) have become increasingly interlinked.

Chocolate is no exception. Indeed, many technological advances are beginning to disrupt the chocolate sector. This presents an opportunity for chocolatiers to modify their production processes or simply expand their professional horizons.

Of these innovations, **3D printing** is, according to many experts, the next major revolution in the food industry. Increasingly efficient, 3D printers make it possible to produce tiny creations with an unbeatable degree of precision.

The time saved, compared to conventional moulds, is the main reported advantage. It also enables chocolatiers to satisfy a wide range of customer demands. Use of 3D printing in the chocolate industry is still in its infancy, but it is already winning over several professionals (Wagralim, 2016, p.24). Of the companies active in the sector, a significant example is Gembloux-based startup La Miam Factory, founded in 2016.

As previously mentioned, the seasonal nature of chocolate is one of the major challenges facing the industry. Sales are lower in Summer, the hottest time of year. However, in late 2015, one of the giants of the chocolate sector, Barry Callebaut, developed a chocolate **“that does not melt in your hand”**.

Elie Van Steen, project manager (Lentschner, 2015), explains that only the manufacturing process changed. The flavour remains identical. This chocolate survives heat better and does not stick to the wrapper. The aim was to win over countries where the mercury regularly reaches 40°C and where little chocolate is consumed, in particular China or India (where locals eat an average of 100 grams per year), Brazil and the African nations.

Driven by the “raw food” movement, **raw chocolate** is becoming increasingly popular, despite its high price (fermentation and drying times are far longer). According to specialists, it possesses nutritional, and even euphoric, qualities not found in conventional chocolate. Raw chocolate maintains more antioxidants.

The raw beans are cold conched in a grinder at temperatures of no more than 40°C (as opposed to 55-70°C for conventional chocolate). True raw chocolate (fusion at approximately 30°C) does not alter the composition of the cacao bean, ensuring that the antioxidants are not destroyed.

While it has been criticised by some for a lack of taste and flavour, raw chocolate has seen its popularity skyrocket in recent years in English-speaking countries and among raw foodists.

It would also be hard not to mention “**chocolate**” that contains no...cacao. This type of chocolate is produced using carob (fruit of the carob tree), the flavour of which strongly resembles cacao. Carob-based chocolate is guaranteed lactose, gluten and sugar free, and contains higher levels of fibre and calcium.

This product is especially useful for very young children who have a low tolerance for cacao, as well as people with allergies and those who choose not to consumer cacao-based products.

Finally, the emergence of 100% natural **pink chocolate** in late 2017 has made a small impact. This new chocolate variety does not owe its hue to artificial colourants, but rather to carefully selected cacao pods, known as Ruby, which are naturally this colour.

These beans are only found in Ivory Coast and certain regions of Brazil and Ecuador. For over ten years, French and Belgian researchers have been trying to produce pink chocolate using these hard-to-process pods. It was Swiss company Barry Callebaut that finally made the breakthrough, at the world’s biggest chocolate factory in Wieze.

Described by the Swiss chocolatier as “indulgent, natural, colourful and authentic”, this chocolate was specially designed to appeal to Generation Y, born between 1980 and 2000. This type of chocolate was initially marketed in Asia (particularly in Japan and South Korea) and recently hit the shelves of several Belgian chocolate shops.

In addition to these innovations, it is also important to mention **recent trends** among consumers, who are looking for **healthier, more natural, more organic and more ethical foods**. For example, stevia extract is sometimes used as substitute for sugar in chocolate, maintaining its sweetness without adding calories. Recently authorised as a food additive by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), Stevia use is expected to increase rapidly throughout the continent.

The use of fruits, herbs and even vegetables in recipes, in addition to “wellness” enhancing ingredients such as matcha green tea and spirulina, also reflects this trend. As we have already mentioned, bars with organic and/or Fairtrade certification, sometimes produced using *bean-to-bar* methods, also look set to continue growing.

Opportunities for a new chocolate industry

An increased awareness of the sad hidden reality of the cacao trade (deforestation, child labour and poverty, as outlined in chapter one), and the risk of a shortage of *Forastero* beans, are driving an increasing number of chocolatiers towards different varieties. They are also working in closer collaboration with those upstream in the supply chain.

Niche markets

Therefore, some artisans, seeking a unique selling point, are turning towards niche cacao producers in countries such as Bali, Madagascar, Ecuador, Venezuela, Peru and Cuba, despite higher costs. These niche markets are more connected to the microeconomic reality of the plantations and encourage growers- who are paid directly- to preserve native varieties,

presenting “an opportunity to mitigate the impact of the expected boom in international demand”⁸⁶.

New approaches, including bean-to-bar

Others, going further than the certification schemes to ensure the sustainability of their supply chains, advocate “mentoring programmes for growers in the plantations from which they import their beans, aiming to protect the environment and offer growers a decent standard of living and income, while developing the local economy.” (Wagralim, 2016, p.27)

This may range from simple training grants to full integration of tools at every stage of the supply chain. In the same vein, the bean-to-bar movement, which originated in the English-speaking world, involves overseeing the entire chocolate production process, from the cacao bean to the finished product. These chocolatiers are passionate about flavour and aware of the living conditions of their producers.

More stringent selection of beans is therefore promising in two ways; it closes the gap between producers and plantations, while opening the door to new opportunities⁸⁷.

Expanding internationally

Global markets with specific needs

Another of our missions at hub.brussels is to help the growing number of Brussels-based businesses to expand overseas. Area managers and a network of Economic and Commercial Attachés (AEC) based all round the world are on hand to help (www.invest-export.brussels), providing information on foreign markets and offering their support in establishing international operations.

Our AECs currently cover 150 countries worldwide, providing insight into the realities of their local markets and the precautions to be taken before launching overseas.

For example, they tell us that in the **US** market:

The difficulties are finding a partner/distributor, the initial costs of registering a trademark and high running costs (real estate/rental, wages) in markets such as the Bay Area or New York, as well as a time difference and distance that make it more difficult to manage a sales network.

⁸⁶Initiatives of this type are have also been implemented in Brazil and Peru. Brazil, which hopes to relaunch its cacao industry, has called on Belgian expertise. (Wagralim, 2016, p.11-12).

⁸⁷Pierre Marcolini tells us that he prefers working directly with the growers, paying them above the market rate. He also wants to avoid the mutualisation of production, found in cooperatives and Fairtrade schemes: this approach leads to unstable quality and makes it difficult to trace the origin of the beans. Similarly Lafont imports his beans from a small-scale Cameroonian farmer who runs a social initiative on the ground, as well as from Cuba (using the same suppliers as Pierre Marcolini). In parallel to this, he runs a social project in Cuba, which he has visited regularly for over 20 years. He trains people in the chocolate/pâtisserie trade, using equipment brought imported from Belgium and locally produced ingredients.

Brussels-based companies such as NewTree (several points of sale in San Francisco) or Genauva, have adapted their sales strategy. For the former, this involves selling through their own stores, and for the latter, designing special packaging.

Attempts to enter the **Indian market** have failed, *“due to import and food chain monitoring regulations. Climate is also an issue, as chocolate tends to become discoloured.”* **We therefore recommend that you “carefully study the market before considering exporting to tropical areas and consult the AEC to share in their experience.”**

As well as helping you export, the AEC can also guide you through the various formalities. For example, the **Cuba** office helped Pierre Marcolini identify cacao growers (by planning exploratory missions to the mountains). They also offered him legal support to *“convince the government to sell pure cacao beans and not their liquor”*. In the past, Cuba had never authorised its growers to directly export the beans, only processed cacao liquor and fat.

Lebanon *“mainly imports couverture chocolate (Callebaut, Belcolade, etc.).”* Attempts to do business there have not had lasting success, for several reasons:

- *“There are a large number of Lebanese chocolatiers, producing quality products for the local and export markets (Gulf states).*
- *There are high duties and taxes on pralines to protect local producers.*
- *Commercial rents are very high.*
- *The retail price of Belgian pralines was too high for Lebanese consumers.”*

The chocolate bar market, however, is far more accessible.

The AEC based in **Kuwait**, whose territory also includes **Qatar and Bahrein**, explains that these countries, where citizens have higher spending power than the average Belgian, are, often mistakenly, seen as a goldmine for luxury chocolate makers. However, the many Asian expatriates who work there are poorly paid and can only afford low-end chocolate.

The situation is different in **Dubai**, which is home to far more Western expatriates. Chocolate is, however, highly valued in this region and Belgian chocolate has a strong presence, particularly in supermarkets (Guylian, Kim’s Chocolate group, Godiva, Côte d’Or, etc.), and in certain *coffee shops* (Galler, Godiva, Guylian, Léonidas, Daskalidès, Corné, etc.). It is rarer to find a dedicated chocolate shop, as seen in Belgium. As for preferred tastes, the secret is: *“the sweeter the better”*.

Luxury Belgian chocolates therefore have a narrower appeal. However, in a region where obesity is an epidemic, there is a significant trend towards “healthy” chocolate, meaning that demand for Belgian chocolate is growing, as demonstrated by recent store openings in Kuwait (the boutique “Après”, which imports Mary et Vanbelle; Galler and Godiva), and the interest Brussels-based artisans have shown in this market.

However, the often unpredictable consumption habits and political tensions (Qatar blockade) may harm Belgian exports. Finally, the question of transport cannot be underestimated, as it represents a significant proportion of costs: sea freight is cheaper, but not ideal for preservation. The opposite is true for air freight.

Speaking of his experience before and after joining the Single Market (of which Poland has been a member since 2004), the AEC for **Poland** says that outside the Single Market, we must not forget that *“confectionary products are among the food products most tightly controlled by the authorities of any country, and often require customs interventions.”*

Italy has its own chocolate-making heritage and is one of the major global producers. However, its specialities, such as *Gianduiotto* - a combination of chocolate and hazelnut- and hot chocolate, do not leave overshadow Belgian chocolate, which is popular with Italians for its reputation and quality. The market is expanding and several Brussels-based chocolatiers already have a presence (Zaabär, Leonidas, etc.). What’s more, numerous chocolate-themed events take place throughout the year (for example le Salon du chocolat in Milan, and Eurochocolate, one of the industry’s biggest events, held in Perugia).

Our final example is that of **Croatia**, where chocolate from Brussels is all but absent. This is due to the existence of *“a local industry tailored to local tastes”*, and the fact that *“several major Flemish chocolatiers have a strong historic presence”*, in this market.

We hope that this general advice will encourage future exporters to carefully analyse their target market, and give a brief overview of the support that hub.brussels can provide.

This includes the “Brussels Exporter Starters Program” (BEST)⁸⁸, the perfect springboard for Brussels-based SMEs hoping to enter international markets. Over the course of five one-to-one coaching sessions, you can learn the ropes of the export trade and formulate an effective internationalisation strategy by developing a personalised export plan⁸⁹.

The chocolatiers of Brussels export

Several of the chocolatiers we spoke to mentioned their experience of exporting. For example, **Antoine Corné**, who has two franchises, one in France and the other in Qatar, hopes to develop more, and emphasises the differences between foreign markets: *“In Qatar, people don’t drink alcohol, and people in the North of France have different tastes to Southerners.”* Therefore, you must adapt.

Meanwhile, **Jean-Philippe Darcis** has around thirty points of sale in Japan and sells large volumes around Valentine’s Day. Japanese tourists often visit his boutique in central Brussels. He also opened a store in Taiwan in September 2018 and plans to open another in Japan. He also stresses that:

It is never easy, because consumption habits are very different (Asians consume far less than Belgians). They are still discovering chocolate and buy two or three, rather than a whole box. You therefore have to create an economically viable concept (Interview, May 2018).

He has also tested the waters in Singapore, but it did not last. He believes that the main difficulty is the need to create an overseas workshop.

⁸⁸ http://invest-export.brussels/fr_FR/best

Pierre Ledent, meanwhile, has a chocolate salon in Brussels and a store in China, where he operates in the mid-range market, with the intention to enter the high-end market in 2018. He also has four or five points of sale in Japan, where he sells during the month of Valentine's day. He stresses that online shopping is very important in China, and he has therefore had to hire a marketing company. He hopes to develop his e-commerce business in China and Japan, without setting up an overseas workshop: he wants to maintain control as he is the one with the expertise. He stresses the importance of the "network" when exporting. He sets himself apart from his Belgian competitors by exporting, and today also competes with Japanese chocolatiers. He plans to increase the product range exported to Japan, currently limited to pralines.

Finally, **Pierre Marcolini** started exporting to Japan in 2000, after receiving a proposal from an investor. He now has around forty retail outlets worldwide, ten of which are in Japan. He prefers to operate through his own stores, so he can maintain control over the product (which is not the case with franchises). He also advises chocolatiers *"to target specific markets (when exporting), rather than opening one boutique here and one boutique there, as this allows you to combine costs and remain viable in the long term."* His workshop is still in Belgium, *"that's where everything comes from and the same product is sold overseas."* This approach enables him to control quality and create jobs in Brussels.

3.3. In summary

No formal training or authorisation (access to the profession) is required to **launch** a chocolate business. However, you must have **sufficient knowledge of management**.

There is also a fairly comprehensive range of public and private **courses** in the Brussels-Capital Region, in both French and Dutch. Based on their own personal experience, professionals are generally critical of the rigour of this training provision.

Various structures and websites are available to help you **develop your strategy**, via a business plan or financial plan. It is also important to carefully consider the **legal status of your business**. This is governed by the new companies code, which came into force in May 2019.

Several services are also on hand to help you **choose the perfect location**. When doing so, you must take into account land use plans and planning and environmental permissions.

In terms of finance, in addition to conventional loans, certain **subsidies** are available to help get your project off the ground.

You must also respect the **AFSCA** food hygiene regulations, as well as obtaining a permit after registering with this body.

Choosing a location is, according to several chocolatiers, often difficult but decisive. When doing so, the analysis of **pedestrian footfall** available from hub.brussels is a useful tool.

Finally, certain **obligations** must not be neglected. These range from SIAMU fire permits to opening hours to compulsory insurance, etc.

The internet has become an essential tool for **developing your business**, and **online sales** of food products have continued to grow over recent years, despite a relative hesitancy on the part of Belgian chocolatiers. This is illustrated by the fact that 76% of businesses that went bankrupt in 2016 offered no online service. Similarly, **social media** (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest) are now a key component of successful marketing.

Meanwhile, recent **innovations** in the chocolate sector are reshaping the landscape, and the choices available to consumers (3D printed chocolate, cacao-free “chocolate”, pink chocolate, healthy and ethical chocolate, bean-to-bar, etc.), respond to their diverse tastes and sensibilities. This expanding world of possibilities presents an opportunity for new artisans to find their niche and signature product.

Finally, the time will come to **expand your business internationally**. To support you in this process, hub.brussels has a network of Economic and Commercial Attachés Économiques in numerous countries, who can guide you and provide an insight into specific markets and their unique characteristics. Our chocolatiers are increasingly replicating their success overseas, particularly in emerging markets such as Asia, garnering worldwide recognition for their expertise.

Conclusion



The chocolate sector is thriving and continues to grow. hub.brussels has also calculated (using EFP figures) that if the number of people studying chocolate-making carried on increasing at the same rate as it has for the last 10 years, everyone in Brussels would be a chocolatier by 2070!

However, in an increasingly competitive market, it is important to create and innovate. You must dare to evolve and disrupt the status quo in order to offer something new. This is particularly true since the chocolate sector is set to face new challenges in the coming years: the threat of raw material shortages, ethical concerns, new consumption trends and innovative technologies are just a few of the current and future issues that we must tackle in order to match the supply of chocolate products to the demand.

What is more, establishing and running a chocolate business requires a combination of dynamism, rigour and patience. You must simultaneously be a realist, a fantasist, and a guardian of tradition. The success of a project also depends on the ability to anticipate the needs of customers in the district and, the local business ecosystem. While administrative processes can be burdensome, hub.brussels and other regional bodies provide valuable support to help you tackle each step and successfully launch your business.

Staying abreast of the latest technical possibilities, trends and diverse tastes will enable new artisans to set themselves apart and stamp their personality on their concept, in order to find a niche in the market. Similarly, in-depth knowledge of the business ecosystem in Brussels will provide those interested in the chocolate sector with a clear yet nuanced vision.

This is the task that we at hub.brussels set ourselves in producing this guide, which we hope has been useful and accessible.

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