
Italian excellencies: In Orsenigo, where Icam produces the "Food of the gods"

CERTAINLY NOT A FAIRY TALE HERE IS THE REAL CHOCOLATE FACTORY

Three thousand recipes, worldwide control of cocoa production, very high automation: in the Como area an artisanal business has become an industrial colossus

By **Andrea Milanesi** - Photos by **Enrico De Santis**

Everything started over sixty years ago, when Silvio Agostoni, a brave and ingenious entrepreneur, founder of Icam, loaded his car with the first chocolate bars produced in his Lecco factory and travelled around lake Como, delivering a box "door to door" to every grocer's shop or food shop he encountered on the road... Today, Icam exports the "food of the gods" to every corner of the planet and it knows the oldest and most secret recipes, the alchemies of percentages and ingredients, all the nuances of taste and smell capable of creating high quality chocolate. Everything becomes even more obvious when entering the new plant built just outside Orsenigo, where every detail tells of a never ending passion, starting from the step listels of the main staircase, made of the different types of wood of the plants coming from the equatorial areas where cocoa is cultivated.

Icam chocolate, however, is Italian to its very last drop and it is the result of an art that is passed on from generation to generation, as explained to us by Mr. Plinio Agostoni, son of Silvio and currently the vice-president of a company officially established in 1946, at the end of the Second World War, when cocoa and the other fundamental ingredients for its processing became once again available on the market.

"Our story is closely connected to some key intuitions of my father, who didn't consider chocolate an elite product, but a noble and high quality food: good, pure and genuine, without substitutes or added fat, which was to be within everybody's reach. For the first time in Italy, he decided to set up a structure that was capable of managing in a complete and integrated way the entire productive chain, from the processing of cocoa beans to the finished product, by using highly innovative procedures and machinery".

This is the imprinting, these are the baselines that have guided Icam along the crucial steps of its existence, when as an artisanal workshop it started by giving itself a sales structure, first on a national level and subsequently on an international level; because, as happens often to *made in Italy* excellence companies, the story of the evolution of a successful company starts from their response to changes in the surrounding reality.



Redefining standards. "With the disappearance of the small retail shops and the establishment of the first supermarkets", continued Agostoni, "our production began to increase also from a quantity point of view, especially starting from the eighties, when the *"private labels"*, the private brands of the large-scale retail trade names started establishing themselves. At the beginning we were asked by Coop to supply its shelves with high quality chocolate at decidedly competitive prices and then we started working also for some important industrial brands".

At the beginning production was for Coop, now it is also for the big companies of Switzerland

Towards the end of the nineties a new chapter was inaugurated that made Icam become a leading company world-wide in the production of biological chocolate and allowed it to enter as a protagonist in the fair-trade market chain (with fair-trade certification). "Our purpose", resumed Agostoni, "was first of all to redefine the concept of "biological chocolate", through the realization of a product that did not lose in taste what it could acquire in terms of ethical profile: a chocolate that would not only be "good" for the ecological balance of the planet, but first of all a delight for the palate. This is also why we have given strategic importance to our policy of a direct relation with the territory, with the major cooperatives of farmers that work in the cocoa plantations of Latin America and Africa - to whom we guarantee the purchase of their entire crop at terms that are most favourable to them - through the presence of Icam personnel (or of subsidiaries), that cooperates, checks, and ensures the quality of the cultivation and of the first harvesting and preservation operations. In these Countries, extraordinary stories of human, social, economic and cultural elevation of entire communities continue to emerge".



Quality and research

Above: Icam bars come out of the production line. On the right, starting from the top: some of the entirely automatic and traceable processing phases. Photo on the left shows Plinio Agostoni, son of Silvio (founder of Icam) and Vice-President of the chocolate producing company, pictured in the warehouse of the new plant in Orsenigo (Como) with 70 Kg sacks of cocoa.

Currently, 50% of the production is sold to the industries and to the important artisanal workshops, whereas the remaining production is transformed into bars or pralines, half of which are allocated to foreign labels and the other half to Icam branded products, with a high level of specialization that gets to the point of including over 100 recipes of dark chocolate coating, 80 of milk chocolate, 25 of white chocolate and 11 of gianduia (*soft hazelnut chocolate*), with over 3,000 items divided between conventional and biological ones, offered also in gluten-free and sugar-free variants.

Obviously, with numbers like these nothing can be left to chance; and this is precisely the reason for which the new plant in Orsenigo was established. "To some extent, this was a choice we had to make", resumed Agostoni; "a necessary investment to remain competitive faced with increasingly diversified requirements - with very high quality standards - of the international market. Right from the design stage of the infrastructure we had the collaboration of Siemens, that managed to ensure complete supervisory activities over all the plants and of the individual machines, regarding both power distribution and the integrated control system, thus guaranteeing full automation and complete traceability, by monitoring production and energy efficiencies along all the phases of the entire chain: from the arrival and stocking of raw material to the programming, planning and realization of the entire process".

Today, on an area of 50.000 square metres, Icam processes 100 tons of cocoa beans and produces 120 tons of chocolate per day, all monitored gram by gram, bit after bit, but the human element continues to play a decisive role, and not only to ensure the proper functioning of extremely sophisticated machinery. "In all the production stages", concludes Agostoni, "the moment of tasting still has a fundamental role; because Icam chocolate must be extraordinarily good, not just perfect...".

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