



Media Backgrounder

Cacao of Excellence Awards

A sector at a turning point

Under pressure from climate disruption and volatile global markets, the cacao sector is confronting the limits of a commodity model that has long prioritised volume over value. As supply risks intensify and farmer livelihoods remain fragile, a growing push to recognise quality is reframing how cacao is produced, evaluated, and traded. The Cacao of Excellence Awards sit inside this shift, documenting flavour, biodiversity, and producer skill in ways that challenge the anonymity of bulk supply and test whether chocolate can be rebuilt around identifiable excellence rather than interchangeable raw material.

What is the Cacao of Excellence programme?

Cacao of Excellence is an international programme dedicated to identifying, evaluating, and promoting high-quality cacao. It combines scientific assessment, sensory evaluation, and farmer recognition to make excellence visible in a sector historically organised around undifferentiated bulk trade.

The programme operates at the intersection of research, training, and market signalling. It provides a global reference point for cacao quality while building technical capacity among producers, graders, and chocolate makers. Its work contributes to a growing infrastructure that allows flavour, origin, and post-harvest skill to carry economic meaning.

What makes the Awards different?

The Awards are not a branding exercise or a marketing competition. They function as an international quality assessment grounded in standardised methodology.

Key features include:

- blind sensory evaluation by an international panel of experts
- scientific analysis of cacao samples
- consistent chocolate preparation protocols
- global representation of producing regions
- documentation of flavour diversity and production practices

The process treats cacao as an agricultural product with measurable quality attributes, comparable to evaluation systems used in wine and specialty coffee.

Why quality matters now

The recognition of quality is increasingly linked to broader sector challenges:

- climate change is altering growing conditions and threatening supply stability



- price volatility exposes the limits of volume-driven commodity trade
- biodiversity loss reduces genetic resilience in cacao populations
- farmers face structural barriers to capturing value
- buyers are seeking traceability and differentiated sourcing

Quality recognition does not solve these problems alone. But it introduces new economic signals that reward skill, experimentation, and stewardship rather than scale alone.

Farmers as producers of value

The Awards highlight producers as active innovators. Many winning farms demonstrate advanced fermentation techniques, ecosystem management, and intentional flavour development. This reframes farmers from anonymous suppliers to identifiable producers of craft agricultural goods.

By making producer excellence visible internationally, the programme supports a shift in how value is perceived and negotiated in cacao markets.

Scale and institutional reach

The Awards operate as a recurring international system rather than a single event.

- Held since 2009, with a new edition every two years
- 45 National Organisation Committees established across cacao-producing countries
- The current edition received 191 cacao bean samples from 45 producing countries
- Many samples are selected through national competitions, while others enter directly in countries where institutional structures are still developing
- Evaluated by an international jury of 38 experts in sensory science, cacao research, and chocolate making

This growing infrastructure positions the programme as a long-term reference point for cacao quality while reflecting the uneven pace of institutional development across producing regions.

A long-term experiment in market change

The Cacao of Excellence Awards are part of a broader experiment: whether systematic recognition of quality can influence how cacao is traded, valued, and understood. The process is gradual and uneven, and quality markets cannot absorb all global production. But the programme offers a model for linking flavour, biodiversity, and farmer expertise to economic visibility in a sector searching for more resilient futures.

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