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Wildness chocolate's Marie Monmont on business behind bars



*After hearing Marie talk at the [Social Enterprise World Forum](#) about her business [Wildness chocolate](#) and her work with Wellington prisons through the [Release to Work scheme](#), I had to know more. At [Two Grey](#) over Wildness hot chocolates and a dark chocolate *délice* each, Marie talked about knocking down doors to work in new ways, partnering with the big industry players to grow organic farming practices, and how social enterprises need to be business savvy to survive.*

How did your chocolate journey begin?

I started in my first kitchen when I was 15 years old. In France you finish school at 14 and a half years old, and then go to a specialist school. I learnt french cooking, and then had to specialise; some people take bakery, some patisserie, some ice cream making, it depends. Me, I picked chocolate making. I finished my study and my degrees and I was ready to travel the world but with chocolate, outside of Belgium, Switzerland and France, there's not much other business. So I worked for hotels like the Ritz Carlton and Intercontinental in many many different countries. I've been everywhere. My kids and I were making a list of all the countries we've been to. I've travelled so much—and a lot with them too—so it's actually more about which countries I *haven't* been to.



Marie and her children while overseas.

How did you come up with the idea of a chocolate business that employs prisoners?

One night while I was cooking at home, I was watching a french documentary about a prisoner who had reintegrated himself into society. In the documentary they were saying how he learnt his skills when he was in the prison. I stopped cooking, picked up the phone and called my mom in France, “Mom, people are working in prisons in France?” She said “Yes. I don't know too much about it but maybe you can call someone.” I call the directory of the prison in France and they explained what they did. The next morning at 9am I was calling the prisons here in Wellington, and asking, “do you have that here?” I

called and I called...and they asked me “well what do you want?” So I wrote a business plan with what I needed. They read it and came back to me about 10 minutes later—and said yes for everything. I started the next day.

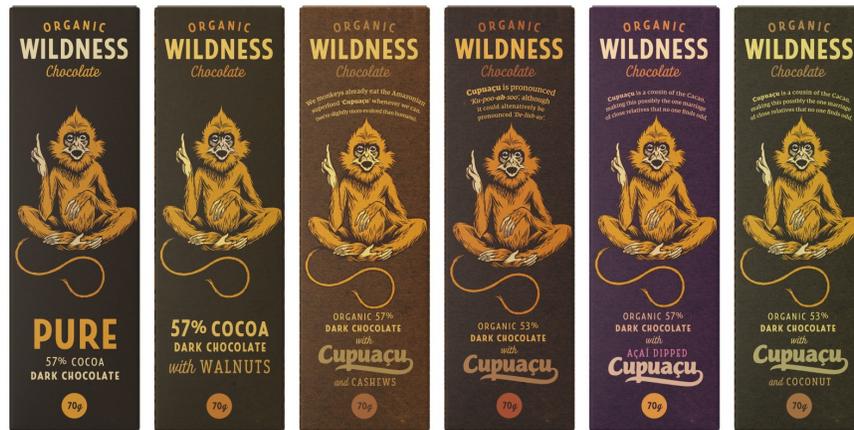


Marie is hoping to set up the chocolate production process inside the Wellington prisons next year.

How do you work with the inmates?

I work with the offenders together inside the prison. There’s no other company like me who goes physically inside—the other companies contract things like laundry to the prison, but they don’t come inside. There’s also an inhouse printery, but the prisoners never see who they’re printing for. I’m the only one inside the prison who is a civilian, and everybody knows me.

We work together on the printing of the packaging, the gluing and assembly...even the graphic design. I know jack-all about computers, but those guys in the printery—the ‘white collars’—they’re highly educated and they really know about computers.



Packaging by prisoners at Rimutaka and Arohata Prisons.

What's it like working with them?

So many things are lost in translation. When I started in the prison, I didn't know what 'P' was. They talked to me about it, and I thought that in New Zealand, they were selling 'pee', like urine. And I was packing the chocolate with them, and I was saying, "and you get high with that!? That's so weird!" And because everything is monitored, there's a camera and someone listening, and the officer comes to me and asks, "did you understand? Do you know what P is?" And I said, "yeah, that's when you go to the toilet". The officers and the prisoners, they were all laughing. They said, "for real? You don't know? You've never seen some?" I said, "all my life I've never seen some". They asked me "which world are you living in!?"

We talk about everything. They want to express themselves, and I ask a lot of questions. They talk about what they've done too. I don't look for it, I honestly don't care, because the condition of them with the drugs or alcohol is a very different situation than them now being with me packing chocolate.

What's important is today, and how we are now. I'm not judging them, so they feel very at ease. Because I'm not an officer, I'm not a lawyer, I'm just a normal person – the only one who's just a normal person who comes inside from the outside.

Last week I was in Singapore and when I arrived back at the prison today, all the officers said, “Here’s Trouble!”. They call me ‘Trouble’ because I push the boundaries further and further, but when they say it, it’s actually a very nice kind of thing. And the prisoners said “Oh you’re back? We missed you.” I said the same to them, “I missed you terribly!” When I’m overseas, I look up the international phone number straight away, and I call the prisoners—“Are you good? Ok so tomorrow we need to pack up that much chocolate and get those ones done...” and they really understand, because they’re running my company.

I’ve got 1000% of trust in them. If they’re not there, there’s no company. And that’s what I say to them — you are an excellent businessman, but you came here because you were selling something illegal, not because of the business.

What do they get out of being involved in the programme?

A normal salary, so that’s good. Most of them will take another 10–20 years before they get out so they don’t see that far ahead, but they usually use it to pay for the crime they’ve done, or they might have a family that they send the money to.

And it’s a very nice place to work. A nice environment, nice tables, nice everything, and the people are very nice. I love it. I go to prisons in other countries to visit, and I see how New Zealand prisons are the best. When the public complains about the Department of Corrections, I say, do you know how hard it is to work with people like that, to re-wire them? You have to be kind, compassionate, forgiving—there’s so many feelings in one day of work, and in an office you would never feel any of that. It’s a very different atmosphere.



What's it been like to set up a social enterprise in New Zealand?

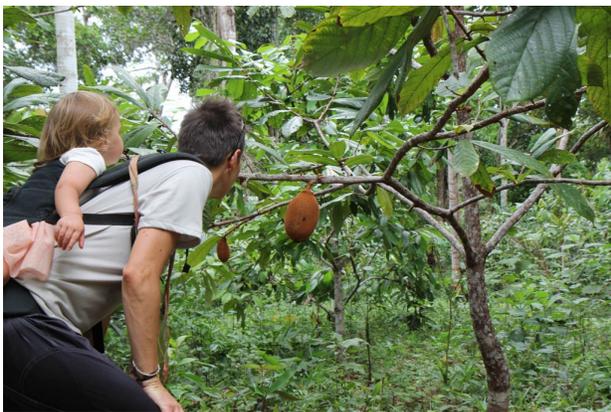
There's no template. I set the templates and say, I want to do that like that. And I look around but nobody's doing it that way, so I knock on every door and say, "I want to work like that" and they say, "well, nobody's done it before but we can try it". I always work with the government but I shake things around a little bit, because that's the person I am. It's a business—I'm not a charity—but it's a different way of doing business. When I started, on my first packaging I called it a

‘social company for the community’, because there was no word ‘social enterprise’. Even today, there are people I talk to who still haven’t heard of the word.

How are you making a difference to the environment?

The chocolate comes from Barry Callebaut—the largest company in the world for processing and selling chocolate. I buy from them because I see the big picture. I said to them, “I want you to make my chocolate, and I want you to use organic beans.” But they said they weren’t sure there was a market for it. At the time I was working in Brazil and there was a factory 30kms from the cocoa bean farms. We had an excess of organic cocoa beans so we went and saw them—they said they could process it on mass, but who would buy it? So then I looked for buyers, and found them straight away. The demand was there, the product was there, but we just made it more accessible. So now, you can have organic chocolate made by the number one in the world, and since it’s started, it’s become the biggest growing market. So that means that there’s more farmers who are growing organic beans and last year we signed another 20 new certified organic farmers. And when I say a ‘farm’, it’s not one hectare, it’s more like 100,000 hectares. So we’re talking a lot bigger impact.

For me this is the only way I can think, with the corporation. We need to work with the people who have the money and the power. You cannot do anything on your own.



Marie in the Brazilian forest with the Cupuaçu fruit (related to cacao), used in Wildness chocolate for its health benefits.

If you had to choose between environmental or social good, which would you choose and why?

The environment. The future, for my children. The environment stays, the people will go. The earth will be always here. First and foremost the environment is my primary focus.

Why do you care about doing good?

I have the passion inside me. I'm passionate about everything, and when I start something I love it. I like to eat, I like to party, I love making my chocolate and food, I like spending time with the children, gardening...in the winter I'm next to the fireplace knitting and my kids wear my outfits. They're not always good, but I love doing it!

When I go for something, I do it without listening to people who say it's not possible or it's going to be too hard. I get pushbacks everyday, but I know me.

I have so much energy that I don't care what the other people think. I'm the one who is going to create the fashion or the trend, for so many things. I've started so many things and seen people take the ideas and make them grow, which is great. I feel good about it.



What advice would you give to other people wanting to start a social enterprise?

If you really want to do it, put everything down, look at yourself, work out what you want to do and how you're going to implement it in the world you're living in. I think most people don't work enough on themselves before they start what they want to do. Then afterwards they say, "Oh, it didn't work because it was not the right time, it was not the right conditions"...but the problem is you! It is possible to be successful but only if you are a business-oriented person. For me I don't

see social enterprise. I see business, and I put what I value into that business. The packaging, the product, the people—I implement it into the business plan. I'm not making a social enterprise and then making a business plan afterwards.

One thing about social enterprises is that a lot of them live on grants, but that can mean that it's not a realistic business. If you start with a grant, it's not the real price of the product if the grant covers the marketing, packaging and graphic design. If you have a good idea for a business, start with your first customer and build it up. I started with \$5000, not \$50,000. And do your research before you start something. When I started Wildness here in New Zealand, I first made some samples of the product and went first to see all the customers and asked if they'd be interested. They said "the product is excellent, but now you need packaging." OK! And we started like that.

What's next for Wildness?

Setting up Wildness Asia. I'm very excited, because I'm working again with Barry Callebaut and we're going to go to the farms in South East Asia and keep increasing the demand for organic beans. And I'm going to do the exact same thing that I'm doing in New Zealand with the prisons in Singapore from March next year.

How can people get their hands on or support Wildness chocolate?

Find it in stores near you, follow our facebook page, or contact us through the website.



Wildness dark chocolate délice from Two Grey, Intercontinental Wellington.

Good stuff showcases good people doing good things. If that's you or someone you know, say hello to rachelknight.design@gmail.com

