

FAIR TRADER

Sheridan Winn talks to Craig Sams, co-founder of Green & Black's chocolate company, about a lifetime in organic food, and his latest eco-friendly venture.

There is something of the Professor Branestawm in Craig Sams. Not the absent-minded side – Sams is cool, ironic and sharp as a tack – more the man who is perpetually trying to solve problems through his innovations.

The millionaire chocolate-maker grew up in Nebraska, on a farm where his grandfather once ploughed virgin soil. After studying economics, Sams headed for swinging London in 1966. He imported kaftans from Tunisia, before founding Whole Earth Foods, a leading organic food company. Seed – Europe's first macrobiotic restaurant – on Portobello Road, followed: John Lennon and Yoko Ono, the Rolling Stones, Marc Bolan and Terence Stamp were regulars at the tables. Then came Ceres Grain Shop, which set the pattern for a new generation of natural food stores. Sams wrote numerous books and magazine articles on the subject of organic living: *About Macrobiotics* (1972) is still in print today. And his wholefood business, Harmony, provided the food for the first Glastonbury Festival, in 1970.

I SHOULD COCOA: THE GREEN & BLACK'S STORY

Later came Green & Black's, which introduced organic, high cocoa-solids chocolate to the UK. Craig Sams's passion for dark chocolate began in Madrid in 1987, when he tasted a bar of Lindt's 70%. Certain there was a viable market for the product in the UK, he was offered some beans by organic farmers in Togo. He jumped at the chance to create his own 70%-cocoa-solids organic chocolate, and had a sample made up at a French lab.

"It arrived in a white wrapper and was exactly what I'd dreamed of since I'd tasted the chocolate in Madrid," says Sams. With his wife Jo, he played with names: Jo came up with Green & Black's – green for organic and black for the dark chocolate – and the brand was born.

Sams made a conscious choice to launch a product that was different. "When you're under-capitalised and over-extended, you can't afford to compete aggressively, so the idea was to be in a sector where there was no competition," he says. "In the high cocoa solids sector, our closest competing brand in the UK was Lindt, with its 49% cocoa solids. There was nothing organic, there were only two sources of organic cocoa beans in the world, and ►

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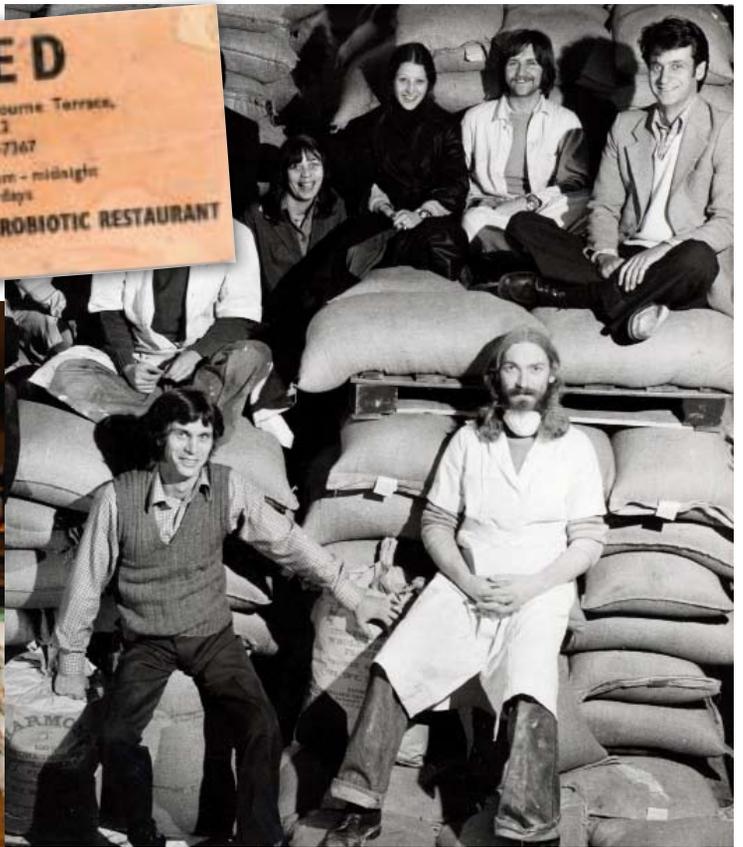
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INTERVIEW

A life close to nature:

An early ad for the pioneering Seed restaurant (right), Craig Sams with the staff of Harmony (far right – Craig is sitting top right), and (below) with wife and Green & Black's co-founder, Jo Fairley.



only one of these was fit for making high quality chocolate – we had that source. And nobody had heard of Fairtrade, but within two years, Green & Black's launched the UK's first Fairtrade product, with Maya Gold."

By 2001, Green & Black's had a 95% share of the organic chocolate market, and was stocked by the large supermarkets. By the time Cadbury Schweppes bought the company in 2005, Green & Black's turnover had reached £25 million, with consumers seeing the brand as a combination of ethics and luxury.

GOING UNDERGROUND

Since 1990, Sams has been involved with the Soil Association, as treasurer and chairman. And his interest in the concept of carbon-neutral products has been steadily growing. Today, he is focusing on green solutions for climate change through his company Carbon Gold, co-founded with Dan Morrell. As part of a low-tech approach to a modern problem, the company produces biochar – wood and agricultural waste which is burned to create charcoal, and then buried in the ground. Not only does this help to lock carbon away from the atmosphere, but adding biochar helps

to prevent nutrients in the soil being washed out. There are advantages for gardeners and growers, therefore.

"The benefits of using it include increased life in the soil," explains Sams, "a reduced need for fertiliser, a reduced need for irrigation, and healthier plants."

In September, Carbon Gold launched its GroChar® Complex for the garden market: "We're getting a very good trade reception, so we're confident that our Carbon Gold range will be in all garden centres by early 2011."

At 66, Sams shows no signs of slowing down. In addition to his business activities, he runs Stonelynk Wood, an organic chestnut coppice producing wood for biochar, as well as a mixed fruit orchard in East Sussex where he grows organic vegetables. Together with Jo he owns Judges Bakery, an organic bakery and local food delicatessen in Hastings Old Town, as well as the Wellington Square complementary health centre.

In all these ventures, Sams's guiding principle is that good intentions are not enough by themselves: success is important, too.

"If you're not doing well, you're probably not doing good," he says. "It's not just nice to do good."

CRAIG SAM'S AN ORGANIC LIFE

1944: born in Nebraska, USA

1966: graduates from Wharton Business School

1967: opens Seed, Europe's first macrobiotic restaurant

1970: sets up Harmony, UK's first wholefood wholesale business

1970: Harmony provides the food for the first Glastonbury Festival

1972-77: publishes *Seed* magazine, 'the journal of organic living'

1991: founds Green & Black's with Jo Fairley

1993: Green & Black's Maya Gold carries the UK's first Fairtrade mark

2001-2007: Chairman of the Soil Association

2005: sells Green & Black's to Cadbury Schweppes; remains President

2007: founds Carbon Gold with Dan Morrell