



YOUR GATEWAY TO INVESTING IN VANUATU

SUCCESS STORIES

From Existing Investors

Mr. Olivier Fernandez, Owner of Gaston Chocolat

Introduction-Origins of a Vision

Gaston Chocolat was founded by Olivier Fernandez, whose deep appreciation for Vanuatu's natural beauty, cultural heritage, and world-class cacao inspired him to build a chocolate enterprise deeply rooted in the islands. Naming the company after his grandfather, Gaston, Olivier paid tribute to family legacy, craftsmanship, and entrepreneurial spirit.

From the beginning, Gaston Chocolat has embodied a philosophy where artisanal chocolate-making meets Melanesian culture. Operating as a genuine “tree-to-bar” producer, the company oversees every step of production, from selecting single-origin Vanuatu cacao beans, through fermentation, drying, refining, and tempering, to hand-wrapping the final chocolate bar. Olivier's commitment goes beyond business “*he seeks to empower farmers, strengthen rural communities, and build a sustainable chocolate industry that benefits Vanuatu economically, socially, and culturally*”. Entrepreneurship has always been the motivation, and chocolate making became a path to unite passion for craft, skill, and community. At the beginning of the tree-to-bar journey in Vanuatu, a name was chosen that reflects honesty, passion, tradition, and adventure. Carrying Olivier's grandfather's name reinforces that family is at the heart of everything, and no dream stands alone.



Building Resilience Beyond Seasonal Migration

In Vanuatu, many households rely on seasonal labour programs such as the Recognized Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme and PALM schemes. While these programs provide stable income, they are vulnerable to external shocks. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated this fragility when border closures disrupted travel, and labor-dependent incomes were severely impacted.

In contrast, Vanuatu cacao proved remarkably resilient. Properly fermented and dried beans-maintained export quality despite global disruptions, allowing Gaston Chocolat to continue shipping internationally. This demonstrated agriculture's potential, especially high-quality cacao, to provide long-term economic security and sustain global trade connections even during crises.

Challenges and Opportunities in the Cacao Sector

Skills and Training

Vanuatu's cacao industry faces a critical shortage of trained professionals. While institutions like the Vanuatu Institute of Technology (VIT) and TVET programs provide foundational technical skills, there is a need for specialized training tailored to commercial cacao farming. Olivier and his team advocate strengthening Rural Training Center and the Agricultural College in Santo to cultivate a new generation of professional cacao farmers, enabling a transition from subsistence to export-oriented production.

Aging Farms and Farmers

Many cacao trees are old, and experienced farmers are approaching retirement age. Olivier emphasizes “that the sector cannot simply “plant farmers” younger generations must be trained and mentored”.

Proactive replanting, education, and succession planning are critical to long-term sustainability.

Climate Change and Environmental Risks

Climate variability is affecting cacao production, with more frequent cyclones, prolonged droughts, heavy rains during La Niña, and shifting seasons. These changes threaten yields and bean quality. However, properly fermented and dried beans remain stable for over a year, giving cacao a unique resilience compared with other agricultural products. Gaston Chocolat's approach combines climate-smart practices with careful post-harvest handling to mitigate these risks.

Strengthening the Value Chain — Partnerships with Farmers

Gaston Chocolat primarily operates in Malekula, cultivating strong relationships with its farmer network. Olivier and his team visit remote growers regularly, providing hands-on guidance throughout the harvest, fermentation, drying, and storage processes.

The company invests heavily in training farmers to ensure quality standards from tree to chocolate bar. This approach has increased bean quality, yields, and profitability for farmers. By paying above-market rates for premium cacao often over AUD 4 per kg Gaston Chocolat has significantly improved rural livelihoods, contributing to income stability and reducing rural-urban migration.

Currently, Gaston employs two full-time staff at the Port Vila facility, four in Malekula, and works with 367 contracted farmers. Expansion plans include additional hires for the café, chocolate factory, and farm-based roles, raising direct employment to approximately ten staff alongside the contracted farmer network.



Certification, Quality, and Strategic Partnerships

Gaston Chocolat has established itself as a benchmark for quality and ethical sourcing. Partnerships with PHAMA Plus helped secure:

- HACCP Certification: Ensuring international food safety standards.
- B-Corp Certification: Demonstrating commitment to social, environmental, and economic responsibility.

The Pacific Horticultural and Agricultural Market Access Plus (PHAMA Plus) Program, supported by Australia and New Zealand. And is working with Vanuatu's Gaston Chocolat Limited to increase processing, storage, quality standards and marketing of specialty cacao, which drives high incomes for farmers. In 2023, Vanuatu exported 1,800 tonnes of bulk cacao, compared with only 80 tonnes of specialty cacao, which are high-quality cocoa beans. Specialty cocoa beans are distinguished by their unique flavour profiles, cultivation methods, and post-harvest processing techniques. There is increasing demand for Vanuatu specialty cacao which currently pays a 20%-30% premium over bulk prices of green and dry cacao.

PHAMA Plus is assisting Gaston Chocolat to expand the processing capacity of its fermentation station in Central East Malekula by installing three new solar dryers to boost specialty cacao production. This collaboration will also support the establishment of a new storage and packaging facility, improve cacao quality and strengthen the branding of Gaston Chocolat products.

Gaston Chocolat Co-founder and Managing Director, Olivier Fernandez said, *"We are grateful to PHAMA Plus for their continuous support since 2020 in improving sourcing and processing of quality standards that enables our business to succeed in high-quality specialty cocoa export markets."*



PHAMA Plus also assisted in installing solar dryers and fermentation boxes for key growers, improving bean quality and reducing smoke taint. These initiatives empowered farmers, ensured consistent premium-quality beans, and strengthened Vanuatu's cacao supply chain.

Production Facility and Visitor Experience

The Port Vila facility combines production, education, and tourism. Visitors can witness every stage of chocolate-making roasting, winnowing, refining, tempering, and hand-wrapping. The café and workshop offer a transparent and immersive experience, enhancing consumer engagement and promoting agri-tourism. Packaging celebrates Vanuatu's heritage, drawing inspiration from Melanesian culture, early 20th-century banknotes, and maps of the archipelago. Each bar tells a story of place, community, and tradition. Plans for the Gaston Chocolat Café at the Port Vila facility are expected to further enhance brand visibility and promote tourism while providing an interactive chocolate experience. A new building is currently under construction to accommodate the Gaston Chocolat cafeteria, adding an exciting new dimension to the existing business activities. This development marks a significant step in enhancing the visitor experience and showcasing Vanuatu's unique chocolate culture. VFIPA looks forward to this expansion and the continued growth it represents.



International Recognition and Export Growth

Gaston Chocolat's commitment to quality has earned international acclaim. For two consecutive years, the company has won awards at the Academy of Chocolate in London, including three bronze and one silver medal. The award-winning cacao was sourced from local farmers in Larevat, Dixon Reef, and Pinalum, highlighting both farmer skill and the Gaston team's craftsmanship. Export markets now include Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Japan, and Europe.

By sourcing at least 70% of ingredients locally and collaborating with other Vanuatu enterprises, Gaston Chocolat strengthens national value chains while promoting the country's artisanal and agricultural potential to global markets.



Community Impact and Economic Development

Gaston Chocolat's impact on rural communities is profound:

- **Income Generation:** Farmers earn significantly higher incomes than before.
- **Youth Engagement:** Training programs provide skills and opportunities for young entrepreneurs.
- **Gender Inclusion:** Initiatives empower women cocoa growers.
- **Rural Retention:** Enhanced livelihood opportunities reduce migration pressures.

Through these efforts, Gaston Chocolat reinforces sustainable economic development, social equity, and rural empowerment, setting an example for inclusive agribusiness in Vanuatu.

A passionate businessman and owner of Gaston Chocolat, he also serves as a dedicated Member of the VCCI National Council. Through his leadership and vision, he has championed the transformation of individually owned agri-business farm blocks, empowering more local entrepreneurs and strengthening Vanuatu's value-addition sector. His efforts continue to boost local production, create employment opportunities, and increase the country's export potential, further positioning Vanuatu as a competitive player in the regional and global market.

VFIPA Commends Gaston Chocolat's Continued Impact in Vanuatu

With success stories such as Gaston Chocolat, VFIPA expresses its deep appreciation for the outstanding contribution that Mr. Olivier Fernandez continues to make toward Vanuatu's economic, social, and agricultural development. His commitment to quality, sustainability, and community empowerment has positioned Gaston Chocolat as a model agribusiness and a true Vanuatu success story.



VFIPA has actively supported the company's growth by connecting Mr. Olivier with several key stakeholders in Japan, strengthening international partnerships and expanding market visibility for premium Vanuatu cacao. These connections play a pivotal role in opening new export pathways, promoting Vanuatu's value-added products, and enhancing long-term foreign market opportunities.

The agency also commends Gaston Chocolat for its demonstrated alignment with national development priorities, including rural empowerment, climate resilience, and value-chain strengthening. The company's focus on farmer training, ethical sourcing, and high-quality production reflects the very essence of sustainable foreign investment that benefits local communities.

VFIPA remains committed to supporting Gaston Chocolat through aftercare services, strategic promotion, and investment facilitation, in full alignment with the Investment Promotion Strategy 2026–2030, which prioritises agribusiness, value addition, and export-oriented industries.

Looking Forward: Vision, Sustainability, and Legacy

Gaston Chocolat's vision extends beyond profit. Olivier Fernandez and his team are committed to:

- Expanding sustainable production practices.
- Strengthening farmer networks and generational succession.
- Building a globally recognized Vanuatu chocolate brand.
- Supporting Vanuatu's economic independence by promoting domestic production and reducing import reliance.

By investing in the value chain, educating farmers, securing international certifications, and creating an immersive visitor experience. Gaston Chocolat is not only producing award-winning chocolate, but also defining Vanuatu as a premium cacao origin, supporting rural livelihoods, and contributing to long-term economic, social, and environmental sustainability.

Passion Cultivated in the Fields

No dream is ever born alone. Life-worthy adventures are never the path of a lone captain, but the shared journey of a dedicated crew, each bringing unique talent and passion. Gaston Chocolat stands as the place where traditional chocolate craftsmanship meets the vibrant culture of Vanuatu.

Farmers are the beating heart of this family, from work carried out in the cocoa fields to the final stages of manufacturing, their commitment ensures a consistently high-quality chocolate. Every bar reflects true craftsmanship, respect for tradition, and the spirit of Vanuatu.

Visitors are always welcome to experience the journey firsthand and enjoy the unique taste of Vanuatu's locally crafted chocolate.





Experience the Real Taste of **Vanuatu-Made Chocolate**

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