

JUST WILLIAM

He may crack jokes and play with flavours, but when it comes to quality, chocolatier William Curley is deadly serious, says Amy Broomfield

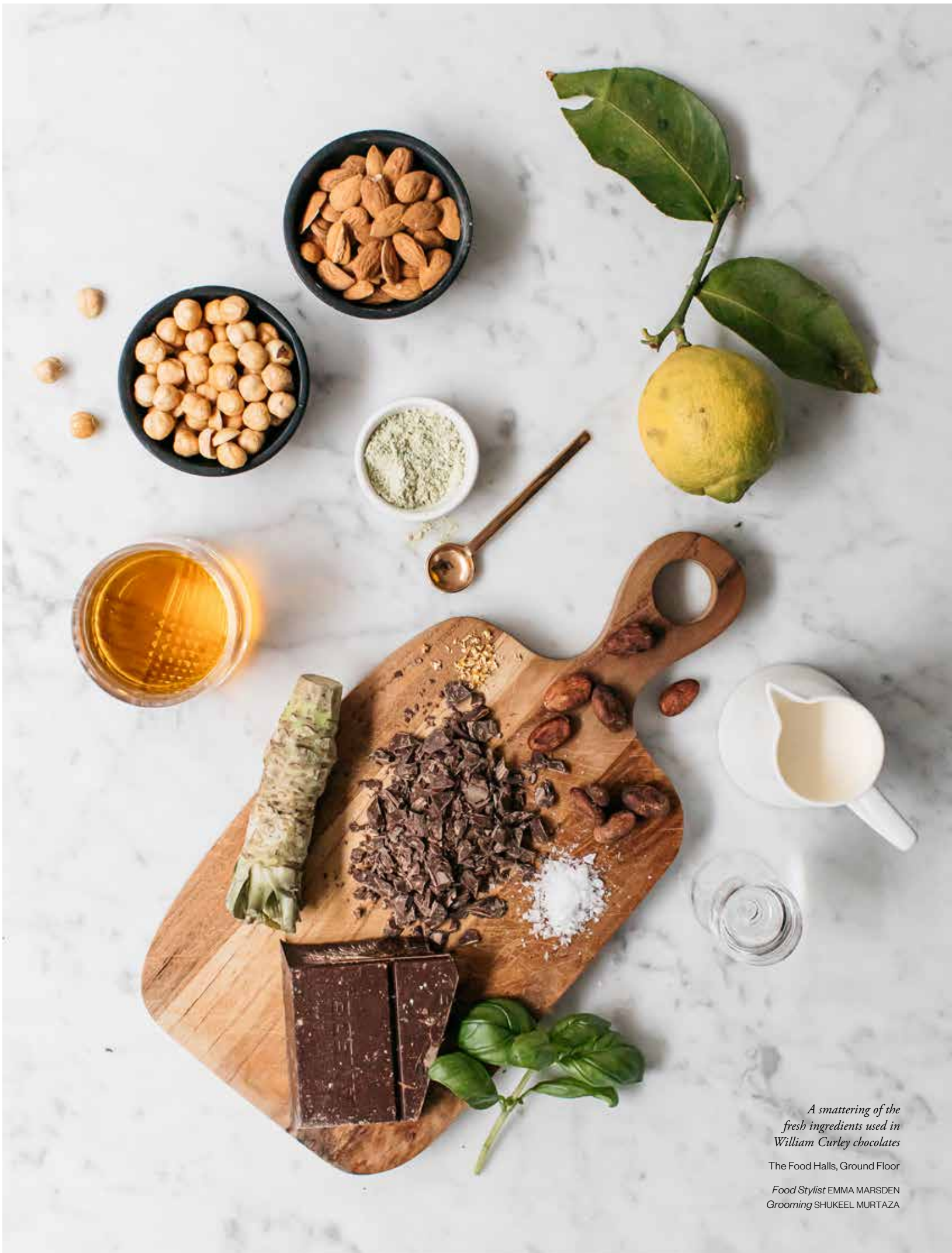
Photographer EMMA CROMAN

Leaning against a panelled cupboard, William Curley poses with a huge cocoa pod in his right hand. “These are actually incredibly hard to come by,” he says, waving the pod in the air. “In fact, bringing them into the country might even be illegal – I’m proud I’ve got one!” He laughs. “Smile,” instructs the photographer, which elicits a quick grin. “Someone once told me never to smile for pictures,” he says. “As a chef, if someone writes a negative review and all they have are pictures of you smiling, it looks really bad.” More laughter.

I first met Curley in 2014, back when he and a small team were operating out of a kitchen in west London. Then, as now, a stern exterior quickly softened to reveal a funny, earnest and talented chef who is extremely modest despite his huge achievements. While the likes of Messrs Ramsay, White and Roux are household names, Curley is something of an unknown and unsung culinary hero. But delve a little deeper, and the skills of the multi-award-winning chef, patissier and chocolatier will blow you away.

Much like in our first meeting, it’s not long before Curley begins dissecting chocolate, how it’s sourced and produced, and what determines its quality. Within minutes, he has the hungry eyes of all the crew on him, eager to learn about, and try, his work. “The best kind of cocoa pods come from South America – Peru, Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador,” he explains. “A good >





A smattering of the fresh ingredients used in William Curley chocolates

The Food Halls, Ground Floor

Food Stylist EMMA MARSDEN
Grooming SHUKEEL MURTAZA

producer will source the pods, extract the beans and ferment them – a natural process that occurs because of the humidity. Then they are air-dried and turned, before being ground into cocoa nibs. Most of the best suppliers will have relationships and links with farmers and producers that go back years and years, like the relationship I have with [Tuscan chocolate producer] Amedei.”

Curley was born in a small town in Fife, Scotland. He recalls his father being a harsh taskmaster, instilling a strong work ethic in him early on (he was required to do a paper round seven days a week from a young age). And to some degree, Curley always assumed he would follow in his father’s footsteps and become a docker. As it turned out, of course, patisserie was to be his calling, in a career kick-started by what he refers to as a series of lucky breaks.

To see out his final year at school, Curley was enrolled in a short woodwork course, but on arriving at college, happened to spy a classroom full of girls. “There were about 15 of them in one room, and in the other room were big lads getting set to do woodwork and metalwork. I don’t know if it was the appeal of all the girls or what, but I just went in, grabbed some chef’s whites and they told me to get going. So I did.”

Curley already had a good knowledge of baking, thanks to many weekends spent with his grandmother: “She baked a lot – shortbread, Swiss rolls... she had a vast knowledge.” And at college, he hit his stride easily. “I loved working with my hands. We would make something, then be encouraged to go out at lunch and sell it – it was a great lesson, though I doubt they’d let you do that today.” Inspired, he enrolled in a longer cookery course and was taken under the wing of a local baker. Then, in another happy twist, his college referred him for a summer job working in the kitchen of a hotel in St Andrews. “I was paid, I was put up. I thought, this is great!”

From there he moved to the Gleneagles hotel, where he spent three years refining and developing patisserie skills. “Back then, I didn’t even know that being a patissier was a job. It wasn’t a celebrated profession,” he says. Encouraged to travel and broaden his knowledge, Curley wrote to every three-Michelin-starred restaurant in France and Belgium in search of his next venture. He received just one reply, from Maison de Bouche near Brussels. “It was a complete game-changer. I saw food being produced to the pinnacle, chefs chasing perfection. I still recall how it was all set up, the discipline of it. Everyone was focused on trying to achieve the absolute best.”

A year later, he moved to London where he worked as a chef patissier for some of the biggest stars of French cookery, including Pierre Koffmann, Raymond Blanc and Marco Pierre White. Had he grown up in France, he might have done work experience in a patisserie or boulangerie; in the UK, his only way into the profession was through working in this type of restaurant. “It’s funny, because while what patissiers and chefs do is in the same category, they are so different,” he says. “Cooking is very much to

a recipe and you test as you go, but with what I do, a set of scales is everything. It’s all about precision, and there’s a reliance on other factors, like humidity. For my craft, art and science run in parallel.”

It was obvious that chocolate was to be Curley’s preferred medium, and he quickly became known for producing rich silky-smooth truffles. A hallmark is his use of inventive ingredients, particularly those from Japan where he has spent a great deal of time (his ex-wife is Japanese). Some of his best-loved flavours use Japanese lime, yuzu, black vinegar and toasted sesame, but he is also well-known for the freshness of his other ingredients, including herbs such as Greek basil and rosemary. Right now, he is working with two types of chocolate produced by Amedei: Blanco de Criollo uses a rare bean that makes a smooth, elegant, fruity balsamic flavour; while the Venezuelan Trinitario bean has cherry-like stone-fruit notes. “The couverture chocolate is the hero, so what I add is a kind of seasoning, if you like.” Has he ever experimented with an ingredient that has gone wrong? “Yes. Seaweed. With everyone using sea salt and seawater, I was sure it would be a winner, but when I tried it, it tasted of fish! I will never forget it – my guys thought it was so funny.”

The freshness of his chocolates is both a blessing and a curse. It means that the

shelf life of his truffles is only around 10 days. With a team of eight artisans and orders totalling as many as 5,000 chocolates a day, that is no small feat. “Everything we make is fresh, with no colourings or chemicals,” he explains. “Our chocolates should be like a good loaf of bread.” That’s the main difference between his and those ‘luxury’ chocolates available on the high street. “If you read the label, you’ll spot the difference straight away,” he says. “What’s the first ingredient? Is it cocoa mass or is it sugar? Supermarkets don’t have the capacity to bring in fresh chocolates every couple of weeks – they do what they do, and I do what I do. The greatest luxury is good food – it’s the one thing I’m willing to spend good money on.” □



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