



Chocolate Enchantment

Chocolate may be called the “food of the gods” but it remains sinfully pleasurable. Culinary author Corby Kummer is an expert in degustation and divulges the intricacies of this universal taste of desire.



DIVINE INDULGENCE



*i*t's hard to think of coffee without chocolate. Many diehard coffee lovers can easily drink a dark-roast espresso ristretto black, without sugar – something even Italians don't do. But they wouldn't even want to contemplate those several blissfully syrupy mouthfuls without a square of bittersweet chocolate beside the small cup. Have you noticed what comes after the plates of soufflé and tarte au citron and sorbet aux framboises have been whisked away and the coffee duly served? A small plate of homemade, fabulously dark chocolate truffles.

There are many other ways to experience the bliss of chocolate, and around the world more and more artisan chocolatiers are finding new ways to give you that bliss. International makers are putting the name of the bean right on the label, and specifying the cocoa butter content. Keeping up chocolate-connoisseurship credentials these days is almost a full-time job – one that requires figuring out which exotic names on labels are cocoa beans and which are proprietary blends.

And cocoa beans, however overhyped the barely pronouncable names might be, are crucial to the quality of chocolate – what kind they are, where they grow, how they are tended and picked, and how carefully they are processed to bring out their flavours before being roasted and ground. If this sounds like coffee, it is, except that people have known for years that the variety and country of origin of coffee beans matters a great deal in the way coffee tastes, whereas they have only recently accepted the concept that the same is true of chocolate.

As when you start to enter the world of specialty coffees, it is both helpful and eye-opening to realize that chocolate starts out with a fruit. Cocoa pods look something like elongated acorn squashes; they start out green and when mature can be a cyan yellow or any of diverse reds varying from magenta to vermilion. They grow right out of the tree's trunk and branches – an arresting sight. Cultivated cocoa pods must be cut from the trees with a machete (there are usually two harvests a year) and then cut open by hand. Farmers often

Seasonal Delicacy: Truffles

It's truffle time of the year, and Nespresso once again presents to you its unique collection of seasonal truffles.

The delicate flavour of the **Truffles Pure Origine*** are prepared by Nespresso's Swiss Maitres Chocolatiers with cocoa beans from one of the best origins in the world, Sur del Lago de Maracaibo in Venezuela. The exclusive Maracaibo Grand Cru ganache is flavoured with a hint of slightly-roasted Robusta coffee from Latin America and a superior flavour of Bourbon Vanilla from La Réunion. A touch of silver hand-brushed onto each truffle makes each taste a sparkling delight.

For a particular sensory exploration this season, Nespresso has created a new variety of **Truffles Fine Champagne***. Using a delicate blend of fresh cream, butter, Cognac Fine Champagne and finest chocolate, Nespresso's Swiss Maitres Chocolatiers have prepared these exclusive truffles to be savoured as the ideal accompaniment to a cup of coffee. At the heart of each truffle is a touch of the best Cognac Fine Champagne surrounded by a dark chocolate ganache, enrobed in finest Swiss milk chocolate and hand-dusted with confectioner's sugar.

Nespresso truffles are produced daily and with no added preservatives, thus guaranteeing incomparable freshness, as with all the Nespresso Grands Crus.

** Available in selected countries only.*



cut off the pods a few days before they are fully ripe, to keep one step ahead of the animals and birds that have an unerring sense of when perfect ripeness is reached.

Some industrial chocolate manufacturers buy the cheapest cocoa beans they can find, and use dark roasts and various added flavourings to cover up mediocrity – again, similar to coffee. “Flavor” cocoa beans, as they are known in the trade, have usually made up minuscule portions of a large candy maker’s signature blend. And that portion could become yet smaller. Two plant diseases, frosty pod and witches’ broom, in Latin America are now claiming 20 per cent of the world’s cocoa beans, and could claim an additional 25 per cent if they spread to West Africa, the source of 70 per cent of the world’s beans. The toll has been highest so far in the land of the world’s best cocoa beans – Central and South America. Ecuador and Venezuela, particularly, grow cocoa that compares with estate-grown coffees.

Furthermore, the threat is to the kinds of beans that have the subtlest and most varied range of flavors: criollo. Almost all of world criollo production is in Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador and a few neighbouring islands. The bulk of world cocoa beans is of the forastero variety, a bean low in both flavour and subtlety. Forastero makes up most of the cocoa production of Brazil and Africa. Although forastero originated in Latin America, like criollo, it is hardier and was easier to plant on a hotter continent. The analogy to coffee

beans is close. Robusta coffee beans, which are easy to grow in many climates and altitudes, dominate world production, whereas arabica beans, which are far harder to grow – they like hot days and cool nights, and come into their glory at very high altitudes – cost more and so are much rarer, even if they are rich in flavour and worlds of subtlety.

Almost any candy bar you buy will be either all forastero or forastero with a tiny percentage of “flavour” beans, either criollo or, much more likely, trinitario, a variety that is a cross between criollo and forastero. Unlike criollo and forastero, trinitario is not ancient; named for Trinidad, it dates only to the beginning of the eighteenth century, when Spanish conquerors were planting cocoa in much of South and Central America. The transformation – the alchemy – takes place where the beans are roasted, ground, and turned into chocolate. The important variables in chocolate making are the amounts of sugar, milk powder and cocoa butter. And of these the level of cocoa butter is decisive. Cocoa butter is the world’s most expensive edible natural fat, partly because of its ability to remain solid at room temperature but melting just under body temperature – that is, in your mouth (and in your hands, if you don’t act quickly). High-level chocolate makers use only cocoa butter, not cheaper substitutes. People love the rich sensation it provides when it hits the tongue. That might be more important than any chemical. Cocoa butter gives chocolate its wonderful “mouthfeel”, that smoothness unlike anything else, and there is no substitute for it.



The criollo variety called the finest of all is porcelana, named for the unusually white colour of the unfermented bean. White is considered a sign of quality, because the whiter the flesh the fewer the tannins and other alkaloids that can give bitter flavours.

But the amount of cocoa butter in chocolate is less important than the care taken in selecting and roasting the beans and the amount of time in the conch. The Eureka date in the history of chocolate production is 1879, when Rodolphe Lindt patented his unique process of kneading chocolate with additional cocoa butter in a “conch” – refining it and enabling the chocolate mass to be melted and poured into moulds. This led to the first chocolate bars. A conch, named for its original nautilus shell-shaped sides, is a vat in which a liquid paste of roasted cocoa beans, sugar, vanilla, and additional cocoa butter is kneaded continuously for as long as 36 hours. The price of chocolate is closely related to how long it spends in the conch.

A visit to a very tolerant chocolate maker – and there are more and more artisan chocolate makers who invest in roasters and conches to make their own chocolate – will demonstrate the difference that time makes. If you dip a spoon into still-warm chocolate that has spent 36 hours in the conch, it will be smooth as enamel – sweet but not cloying, wonderfully mouth-coating but not for too long. You will want to close your eyes to let yourself be overtaken by a sensation that drives out all else. Chocolate education does start with bars, whether the primitive ones made by some Spanish and Sicilian ones, which spend no time at all in a conch, or ultra-refined French, Swiss, and Italian ones. When your eye is caught by an alluring name, say “Manjari”;

try buying it in extra-thin squares, which have the advantage of cracking between the teeth before succumbing to the warm tongue. Let each taste melt thoroughly before the next bite (so much more satisfying a way to eat), and try to remember each sensation. There will be a lot of fruity acid in Central American chocolates, especially, and often some bitter notes; the after flavour should never be dominated by sugar but should leave you thinking more of berries, citrus, or even tobacco. Vary the tasting with soda water, which helps clean the palate, and possibly bread (a square of chocolate on a slice of baguette is the classic European school child afternoon treat, one that need not be limited to school children). Or let chocolate reach its amplified glory – melt a small bite in a mouthful of espresso.

If you must give in to sensuous abandon, look for the freshest truffle you can find, with no added flavourings, just chocolate, cream, butter, and of course a bit of sugar. Enthusiastic chocolate-shop owners are trying their hand at making truffles in more and more cities, and because it's always good to buy local, by all means try them out. But if you're looking for heaven, there are always Brussels and Zurich, where it is hard to find a bad truffle – they usually come in good and great varieties. A small thin cardboard container of Sprugli truffles du jour from the confectioner in central Zurich is one of the most welcome gifts imaginable. If it reaches its recipient. 🍫

