

WHY
THE
WORLD
NEEDS

Chocolate

BY KIMBRA CUTLIP



Rumor has it that the early 16th century Aztec Emperor Montezuma imbibed a bitter liquid made of cacao beans daily to fortify his virility and strength. Two centuries later, the drink had evolved into a sweet, hot cocoa concoction favored by that legendary womanizer Giacomo Casanova. Today, cocoa beans are transformed into a staggering variety of decadent confections, and the wisdom of the ages is being revealed as we come to understand our special relationship with chocolate.

We Love Our Chocolate

Despite shrinking household budgets and a global drop off in disposable income, the National Confectioners Association reports that U.S. chocolate sales have grown by three to four percent annually for the past few years. In 2010, Americans consumed more than three and a half billion pounds of the stuff 48 million of which were bought the week of Valentine's Day.

A quick look at the chemical properties and cultural influences surrounding chocolate—from its complex flavor profile and proven health benefits to its social connotations and relative affordability—it is easy to understand why chocolate is forever growing in popularity.

"Chocolate can be so complex and so simple at the same time," says Zoe Tsoukatos of Zoe's Chocolates. "It's fun and it's nostalgic, and I think there's such a beauty in chocolate." For 100 years, Tsoukatos' family has been in the chocolate business, and she runs the daily operations for Zoe's Chocolates in Frederick which she owns with her father and two brothers.

Epicurean Evolution

The chocolates they create are a testament to the changing American palate which has grown bolder and more sophisticated with the profusion of ethnic cuisine and gourmet cooking shows. At Zoe's, the family's Greek heritage finds its way into their creations

through ingredients such as sesame, honey, pistachio, pomegranate and even Mawodaphne, a sweet Creek wine. "You look at the food that's out there, and people are a lot more open to trying new flavors," Tsoukatos says. "They want more interesting and high quality products." The typical butter cream bonbon of yesterday would not fly with chocolate connoisseurs of today. Even bar chocolate has been elevated to new epicurean heights as flavored versions such as chili pepper, pear, and bacon have begun to appear on grocery store shelves.

Presentation has also become an important factor in boutique and artisanal chocolates. Q Coffee and Chocolate in Westfield Annapolis Mall sells truffles dusted with gold and a standing mushroom-shaped chocolate filled with caramel. The store opened on Valentine's Day last year, with a selection of chocolates made by hand on site. Their recipes include such creations as champagne truffles, mango truffles and Oreo bark. Co-owner Hanan Ingel admits that it is a tough time for new retail businesses, but he says he believes in the power of his product. "Chocolate is instant happiness," he says. "For me, at least. I can't be sad around chocolate."

What's Chocolate's Attraction?

As owner of a chocolate shop, Ingel must be a happy guy, and in fact, evidence suggests there may be something to that. Compounds found in chocolate have the potential to stimulate the brain's pleasure center. Perhaps Casanova knew something after all. According to Dr. David Katz, Director of the Prevention Research Center at Yale University, "Anandamide and theobromine are among the most likely candidates to account for the mood-enhancing and craving-inducing allure of chocolate." Anandamide, derived from the Sanskrit word for "bliss," can reduce pain and depression and affect appetite, memory and fertility, while

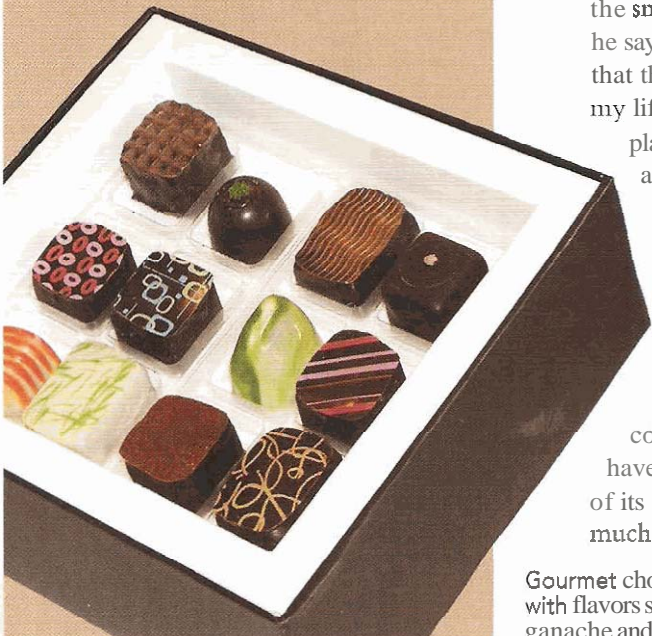
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Cocoa flavonoids, the antioxidants in chocolate, have a powerful ability to reduce cholesterol, lower blood pressure and increase vascular health. Unfortunately, a lot of chocolate doesn't have much of that good stuff in it. Many store-bought candy bars have no flavonoids, and even high-quality dark chocolate that exceeds 60 percent cocoa only contains a fraction of the amount that studies show are needed to improve cardiovascular health. To get the full benefits of chocolate's antioxidant properties, we would have to chow down on enough unhealthy fat, sugar and calories to nullify any potential benefits. Still, most scientists and nutritionists agree that in small quantities, chocolate could be good for you. As with red wine, which also contains healthful flavonoids, the prescription is a cautionary one: a glass or two of wine a day, a square or two of very dark chocolate a few times a week. And really, who can complain about that?



Chocolate comes from the seeds of the Cacao tree fruit. Once the seeds, or beans, are removed from the football-shaped fruit pod, they are fermented, dried, and ground into a paste called chocolate liquor. The liquor contains both cocoa solids and fat known as cocoa butter. When the cocoa butter is extracted from the liquor, the remaining solids can be ground into cocoa powder. Chocolate liquor, cocoa butter and cocoa powder are the basis from which all chocolate is made.



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theobromine is similar to caffeine and may contribute to cravings.

In addition, chocolate is a food with a very complex flavor profile, and it contains a mix of properties that can make a food particularly enjoyable. Dr. Paul Rozin, a University of Pennsylvania psychology professor who studies human food preferences, says chocolate's main components—aroma, sweetness and high fat content—give rise to the rich texture and satisfying mouth-feel that can make it so appealing. He also says there is a strong cultural aspect to our love of chocolate, noting that China and India consume very little of it. "People often crave something because they're attached to the smell, taste and maybe memories," he says. Ingeel makes a strong case for that theory. "I have experiences in my life of trying chocolate in different places," he says, "and those places are marked for me, now. The flavor brings them back."

Chocolate as Health Food?

Whatever the exact cause of our desire for it, whether nostalgia or chemistry or a combination of both, chocolate sales have gotten a big boost from reports of its antioxidant qualities. In fact, much of the industry's recent growth can

Gourmet chocolatiers experiment with flavors such as burnt caramel ganache and pistachio honey.



be attributed to a rise in demand for dark chocolate which has the most antioxidants. "Evidence is mounting that dark chocolate likely lowers cardiovascular risk," says Dr. Eric Ding of Harvard Medical School. He recently published a review of 24 scientific studies that looked at the health benefits of chocolate in more than 1,100 participants. "Notably, cocoa flavonoids may prevent heart disease via lowering blood pressure, lowering bad cholesterol, raising good cholesterol, improving insulin sensitivity, and improving vascular blood flow," he says.

Ding warns, however, that these findings are not a carte blanche for chocoholics. "Our studies found benefits with 400 to 500 milligrams per day of cocoa flavonoids, which is about 33 bars of milk chocolate or about eight bars of dark," he says. "Those are astronomical amounts beyond any reasonable daily intake."

The balance between an effective dose of flavonoids and way too much chocolate presents a conundrum, but according to Katz, one to two ounces of dark chocolate (60% cocoa or higher) several times a week may provide a health benefit without overloading calories and fat.

So, just as it has always been, chocolate should be an indulgence to be savored as a luxury. Fortunately, it has come a long way from its bitter origins as a luxury drink available only to a privileged few. "It's hard to buy a Mercedes," says Tsoukatos, "but everybody can afford at least a couple pieces of chocolate." **TOTB**



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