

SPOTLIGHT ON . . . chocolate

CHOCOLATE

GET CLOSE TO THE SOURCE
WITH DELECTABLE RESULTS

BY AMY PATUREL



Dating back to ancient times, the Aztecs and the Mayans recognized chocolate as a culinary goldmine. Dubbed “food of the gods,” the prized ingredient was so valued that it served as a form of currency, says Jason French, chef/owner of Ned Ludd in Portland, Oregon.

Originally consumed as a frothy, bitter drink, chocolate gradually met sugarcane and honey to suit European tastes. The flavorful potion traveled with the Spanish explorers and quickly became the “it” drink among Spain’s fashionable elite. But it wasn’t until cocoa giants, including Rodolphe Lindt, Henri Nestlé and Milton Hershey, got in on the action that chocolate became a sort of edible mood-booster available to the masses.

Since then, interest in cocoa has continued to soar, and chocolate remains a coveted indulgence. Now, it’s primed to take up even more space on the culinary landscape.

CHOCOLATE AT THE ROOT

In an age when chefs are making their own charcuterie, craft brewers are growing their own grains and baristas can tell you which farmer tended the coffee beans you’re drinking, a growing number of culinarians are trying to master the art of making chocolate from bean to bar.

Like wine and coffee, cacao beans are affected by the soil, landscape and environment in which they’re grown, explains Allen Susser, consulting chef at Jade Mountain Resort and Anse Chastanet in St. Lucia, the Caribbean. Chocolate lovers are discovering that where cacao pods stem from—St. Lucia, Trinidad, Ecuador, Tanzania or Madagascar—dramatically affects its flavor profile.

But cacao doesn’t become cocoa until farmers remove the cocoa pods with a machete, crack them in half and scrape out the beans. They kill off the enzymes and ditch the pulp through fermentation, a process that helps the flavors evolve and can last anywhere from five to seven days.

Roasting, too, affects the end result. “Flavor develops and changes depending on how long and slow you roast it or how fast and hot, and how quickly you cool it,” says Susser, who hired three culinary interns to roast beans at different intervals and temperatures to develop Jade Mountain’s signature chocolate.



FROM BRANCH TO BEAN

While chocolate’s flavor depends on everything from fermentation to conching, the type of bean matters, too. Just like coffee, which comes in species such as Arabica and Robusta, chocolate has its own troupe of beans. The most common cacao categories are:

Forastero Up to 70% of the world’s chocolate stems from forastero beans. Originally from the Amazon, forastero trees now grow all over the world, but the bulk of them stem from West Africa. The full-bodied species produces better yields than other varieties, but also requires a longer fermenting time.

Criollo The predominate bean in native Spain, criollo beans have a mild bitterness and acidity. Some call it the world’s top-line chocolate. The rub: Criollo pods have a low yield, they’re vulnerable to disease and they’re pricey. So it’s no surprise that criollo beans account for only 10% of the world’s chocolate supply.

Trinitario A hybrid of criollo and forastero beans, trinitario are hardier and less fruity than criollo beans, but less bitter than forastero.



After roasting and cooling, chocolate workers crack the beans, remove the thin husks and grind the resulting cacao nibs for hours to create cocoa liquor, often adding sugar or cocoa butter in the process. Then, they iron out harshly acidic notes with 24-36 hours of slow stirring called “conching.”

The final step is tempering the chocolate so the crystals align into a snappy round or bar with gleaming sheen. In most cases, chocolate makers heat the chocolate to 110-115 degrees, cool and seed it, then rewarm it to around 90 degrees. Once the cocoa goodness reaches the correct temperature, chocolate makers pipe it into molds, it sets for an hour (or more) and it’s ready to roll.

OPPOSITE: The Chocolate Spiced Martini at the Jade Club.

ABOVE, TOP: Dried cocoa beans await processing.

BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT: Cocoa harvest at Emerald Estate in St. Lucia. Jade Mountain heart truffles for turndown service, produced in the resort’s chocolate laboratory.



THE FRUIT

As a consulting chef for Jade Mountain Resort, St. Lucia, the Caribbean, Allen Susser designed an entire cacao program around the trees that grow on the resort's two properties in St. Lucia. "I went to the owner's farm, tasted the fruit, and couldn't believe how sweet, unctuous and juicy it was," he says. "They have the trees, the beans and the ability to make chocolate right on the property. That's not done anywhere else in the world."

In fact, having immediate access to the fruit for use in salads, vinaigrettes and savory dishes is unique. With a taste of ripe peaches, grapes and tropical lychee, the cacao fruit is an ingredient in its own right.

"We actually capture chocolate runoff and use it in the kitchen as a vinegar for vinaigrette, barbecue sauce and marinade," says Susser. "The possibilities are endless."

TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: 1) A cocoa tree at Emerald Estate. 2) Gotham's six original chocolate blends: The Independent, Decadent, Elegant, Wild, Intense and Grace Bar. 3) Chocolate-inspired canapes at Jade Mountain Club.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Emerald Estate 90% chocolate bar.

OPPOSITE: Gotham's Black Forest cake—chocolate cremeux, cherry balsamic, fresh cherries and cherry sorbet.



THE SWEET TRANSFORMATION

Crafting chocolate isn't for those who can't take the heat. It's both art and science that requires carefully controlled conditions during each step of a complicated process. Nevertheless, it's becoming increasingly easy to track down handcrafted chocolate.

Artisanal chocolate makers such as Mast Brothers in Brooklyn and Dandelion Chocolate in San Francisco have launched bean-to-bar operations. The promise: each batch of bars will be different, nothing will be mass-produced and every bite will be crafted with attention. While such inconsistency generally doesn't work for the Whole Foods and Starbucks of the world, it does carry cachet for those firmly planted in the farm-to-table movement.

According to Ron Paprocki, pastry chef at New York's Gotham Bar and Grill, the trend began eight or nine years ago when culinary mastermind Thomas Keller began using Mast Brothers chocolate in desserts. "That caught pastry chefs' attention, and then the bean-to-bar phenomenon started blowing up," he says. "Now, there are nine different craft bean-to-bar companies in Brooklyn alone." And Hershey, Lindt and even chocolates as seemingly posh as Godiva have become four-letter words among artisanal connoisseurs who claim bean-to-bar is the only way to experience chocolate.

But no matter how you ferment, dry or roast it, cocoa is a finicky ingredient. It does not like excessive heat. It hates water. And tempering it can drive even the most committed artisan toward generics. Those are just a few of the reasons why Paprocki leaves the technicalities of chocolate making to the experts, focusing instead on working with an already finished high-quality chocolate.

He relies on Swiss company Felchlin to produce the aromatic 70% dark chocolate blend of Ecuador and Bolivian beans for Gotham's signature bars and desserts. "Even without the bean-to-bar component, working with chocolate can be tricky," says Paprocki, who recently placed his second 3,500-pound order. "When I first started, I failed miserably over and over again. Then one day I had an 'aha' moment and everything became much easier."

Now he whips up six custom-blended chocolate bars, as well as a 16-piece set of hand-painted, filled bonbons that changes seasonally. In his greenmarket collection,



for example, Paprocki pays homage to local purveyors with flavors such as rooftop honey featuring Andrew’s honey (hives are located on rooftops throughout New York), blackberry and balsamic thyme.

That type of creativity is hitting the restaurant space, too, with cocoa becoming a base for layering flavors. Gotham’s Black Forest cake, for example, is a work of art boasting eight different chocolate components. “When they’re composed correctly, it looks like a rock formation, complete with black cherries on the forest floor,” says Paprocki.

GOING BEYOND THE BAR

Whether chefs are seeking a simple or sweet garnish—a dusted plate, shavings on top of game, a cocoa-dipped martini rim—the applications for chocolate are seemingly endless. And inspired chefs are taking the bait and moving beyond chocolate-dipped strawberries and flourless cake and incorporating cocoa into everything from salads to lamb.

“One of the big culinary trends is toward expanding flavor profiles, so big, bold popping flavors,” says French of Ned Ludd. “Chocolate fits the bill because it has so many different flavor notes and each has a different effect on the diner’s palate.”

It can be velvety smooth in desserts or intense and bitter for savory applications. And because chocolate has acidity, it also adds nuance to marinades, sauces and vinaigrettes. Mole is a classic example, says French of the traditional Mexican dish featuring a mix of chilies, cinnamon and cocoa powder (among other ingredients).

“There are just so many opportunities,” says Susser. The key is recognizing that cocoa is more than just a base for bars and desserts. It’s a complex ingredient like cumin or butter that, he says, is largely untapped. Until now. Culinarians are finally waking up to the myriad possibilities for chocolate, inspired, perhaps, by a morning cup of hot cocoa. ■

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DID YOU KNOW?

The ratio of cacao content, including added cacao butter, determines the percentage of cacao. At higher percentages, chocolate lovers can attribute any flavor differences to the origin of the cacao, not the amount of sugar in the confection.

