

Chocolate

UNWRAPPED

A JOURNEY INTO SWEET DECADENCE

It's the time of year when our thoughts turn to romance and chocolate, two eternal concepts that have delighted and bedeviled us for centuries. Romantic love cannot be explained. Love of chocolate? Well, we'll try our best.

BY JOSEPH HAYES





Split open a pod from the cacao tree, and you'll find beans embedded in the white pulp.

The Origins

All the world's chocolate comes from the Adam and Eve of cacao beans: Forastero from Brazil and West Africa, where most of the mass production beans come from; and Criollo, grown in Mesoamerica and Indonesia for its delicate flavor. A hybrid tree, Trinitario, was cultivated in the 1700s to grow on Caribbean plantations and has spread to Sri Lanka, Africa and Papua New Guinea, where much of the world's dark chocolate can be found. Africa produces more than 70 percent of the world's cocoa (cacao refers to the tree and its beans; cocoa is the processed powder).

Cacao trees are odd, fragile things, evergreens that grow only in shady lowland tropical forests with constant—but not too much—rain and temperatures never below 69 degrees or above 89. That leaves a chocolate band around the world 10 degrees above and below the equator—and that's all. Seedling plants can be purchased in South Florida, but they will never bear fruit. Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden in Coral Gables grows greenhouse cacao trees, which seem more like pets than landscape.

•FACTS ABOUT•
CHOCOLATE
DID YOU KNOW...

Cacao is grown on more than 17 million acres of tropical forest in 58 countries, and is worth in excess of \$4 billion annually.

The History

John Dussling at the World of Chocolate Museum and Café points to the chocoholics of the Maya and Olmec civilizations as the forefathers of our modern obsession.

"Chocolate was solely for royalty and priests," he says. "From about 400 B.C., coarsely ground and extremely bitter cacao, mixed with hot peppers, was almost holy." So revered were the football-shaped cacao pods (the fruit of the *theobroma cacao* tree, Greek for "food of the gods"), that they were used as currency. Fast forward to the 16th century, when Spanish explorers brought *xocolatl* back to Europe from the New World, starting a chocolate craze that has been prohibited several times (the Pilgrims banned chocolate in the Plymouth colony in the late 17th century and inadvertently coined the blissful term "Devil's food"; Mexican bishops outlawed consumption during church services in the 1860s as a sinful distraction from sermons).

Coenraad Johannes van Houten, a chemist and chocolate maker in Holland, invented a dry press for cocoa beans in 1828 that gave birth to what we still call "Dutch chocolate." In 1879, Rodolphe Lindt created the liquid-centered delight we know so well, and American Milton Hershey, who created an entire town around chocolate, became the first mass manufacturer of candy bars in 1905. We haven't looked back since.

TREE: ISTOCK; PULP: NATIONAL CONFECTIONERS ASSOCIATION'S CHOCOLATE COUNCIL



Types of Chocolate

What happens after the beans are harvested is as varied as the world's tastes. Candy makers talk about the darkness and subtlety of French, the fragrance of Belgian, the assertiveness of Italian, the richness of Swiss milk chocolate, or the rustic texture and bold flavor of Mexican. In Dubai, chocolate made with camel's milk is a high-status treat. The occupation of Sicily by Spain in the 16th century brought cacao pods to Modica, where they combine pure cocoa butter (the rich fat left once cocoa powder is removed) with cinnamon and sugar to make sinfully rich bars, and have a tradition of cooking rabbit in cocoa powder, *u lebbriu 'nciucculattatu*. Several Korean manufacturers make candy bars from seaweed sheets, as well as kimchi and ginseng enrobed in chocolate. London; Paris; Tübingen, Germany; Mexico City; and our own Fort Lauderdale hold massive festivals, drawing thousands (Italy's Eurochocolate Fest brings more than one million chocofans to Umbria in the fall).

Most of the world's chocolates are refined in Holland or Belgium and eaten in Switzerland (23 pounds per person per year; Americans eat a paltry 11 pounds each, not even in the top 10 worldwide). Tiny Belgium produces more than 172,000 tons of chocolate a year and, according to the International Cocoa Organization, just six transnational corporations make 80 percent of the world's chocolate, including Mars, Mondelez (formerly Kraft), and Mexico's Barcel SA.

The Commerce

Chocolate is big business, a multi billion-dollar industry on the manufacturing side alone. Freestanding chocolate shops generate almost \$900 million annually, according to business publisher IBISWorld. The shop at World of Chocolate, on International Drive, sells confections by Hachez in Germany, Butlers in Ireland, Italian Amedei and Colombia's Santander. "Chocolate doesn't just happen," Dussling says.

It only takes a peek into the Peterbrooke Chocolatier shop in Winter Park to see that business is sweet. Kevin and Jami Wray run the retail operation as well as create recipes in the back, drizzling dark chocolate on salty popcorn (their best-selling item) and hand-dipping fruit. "People come into the shop," Kevin says, "and they're in a good mood." The Wrays were at the leading edge of the dark chocolate bacon craze and supply chocolate to local restaurant kitchens such as Prato and Bosphorus for their own creations. On average, they can go through 500 pounds of 10-pound solid chocolate bars from Ivory Coast a week. "We never get tired of it," he says. "We take chocolate home every single day."

•FACTS ABOUT•
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DID YOU KNOW...

In the United States, milk chocolate only has to contain about 10 percent actual chocolate.



SPOON: NATIONAL CONFECTIONERS ASSOCIATION'S CHOCOLATE COUNCIL; ROWS: ROBERTO GONZALEZ; GIFT BAGS: PETERBROOKE CHOCOLATIER



The rows of heavenly goodness seem endless at World of Chocolate. Left, Peterbrooke Chocolatier in Winter Park has its tasty product packaged and ready to go.



STRANGE CHOCOLATE

From pigs to pot, a chocolate for every taste:

Oven roasted, hand-dipped crickets from **Fluker Cricket Farms** in southern Louisiana. Enough said. flukerfarms.com

The folks at **McIlhenny** create dark and very spicy Tabasco bars. countrystore.tabasco.com

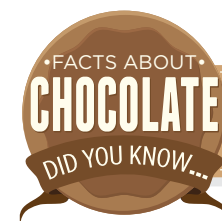
Roasted and ground cacao beans make for a splendid coffee substitute via **Choffy**. drinkchoffy.com

Tennessee's **Prichard Distillery** brews a double dark chocolate bourbon. prichardsdistillery.com

Legendary chocolatier **Dominique Persoone** makes chocolate lipstick in his factory in Brussels. thechocolateline.be

David Briggs in Oregon goes whole hog, making chocolate using pork rinds, bacon and pig's blood as ingredients. xocolatdedavid.com

California's **Bhang Medicinals** makes a cannabis-infused bar (only available in California).



Denmark's Knipschildt Chocolatier sells "La Madeline au Truffe," a dark chocolate truffle with a real from-the-ground, French black truffle inside, for \$2,600 a pound.



David Ramirez crafts chocolate works of art at his shop in south Orange County.

The Craft

Naming yourself a "chocolatier" is sort of like hanging out a "therapist" shingle; there's no requirement of training or accreditation. But professional chocolatiers, unlike chocolate makers, usually get certified through a culinary school or a program from Canada's Ecole Chocolat or Chicago's Chocolate Academy. Making truffles at home isn't as difficult as sculpting, but that doesn't mean it's easy: Local professional chocolatier David Ramirez says it takes weeks to teach someone candy making. From grinding and refining to tempering and molding, the process can require Belgian melters, humidity-controlled storage cabinets and enrobers. Or a copper pot and lots of luck. Peterbrooke's Kevin Wray explains: "There are seven different alignments that cocoa butter crystals can take while you're cooking. Six of them are bad."

Krys Pettit of Orlando is just starting her chocolaty journey, having taken an online course from Ecole Chocolat. "There is a lot of science involved," she says, "but it's also art. The humidity, the temperature, the ingredients—you can buy melting chips at a crafts store, but it won't be the same as a hand-rolled bonbon made from a block of Belgian chocolate."

Chef Andrea Zelen literally wrote the textbook on chocolate craft. She teaches tempering, sculpting, plate decoration and history at Orlando's Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts. "We're seeing a trend now blending sweet into savory," she says, pointing out the bacon craze. "But you can't be a pastry chef without knowing chocolate. And you can eat your mistakes."

Healthy & Romantic

When someone says you eat too much chocolate, here's your defense. Cacao is a potent mix of chemicals—flavonoids, aromatic terpenes, theobromine, polyphenol, methylxanthine—with literally thought-provoking characteristics. Antioxidant flavonols are thought to improve circulation, including blood flow to the brain, and can open up airways and suppress coughs. The antioxidant levels of unprocessed cacao are off the charts, while theobromine can treat high blood pressure, and is being tested for use against cancer. Researchers have found that teenagers who eat a lot of chocolate have lower levels of abdominal fat (take that, diet!), and dark chocolate can enhance reaction time, attention span and low-contrast vision.

Oddly enough, more chocolate is sold during Easter and Halloween than Valentine's Day, but the romantic side is still a draw. Italian researchers have reported that women who eat chocolate every day have more sex drive.



Unlike the chocolate-crazed Swiss (who consume 23 pounds of the sweet stuff per person annually), the average Chinese consumer eats only about 3.5 ounces a year.

The Art

Fine artist Paul Joachim dubs himself "The Chocolate Genius," and while he makes sweet confections with bacon or spicy sriracha pepper, his focus is on creating figurative sculptures and busts of people in chocolate—often live. "It's much more difficult than working with clay," he says. "I have to worry about temperature and humidity, and I work pretty fast." Joachim, who is based in Oviedo, has sculpted at the Orlando Museum of Art, the New York Chocolate Show and on live television. He goes through 1,000 pounds of ordinary edible chocolate a year. "The best part is the smell," he says. "I have a strong relationship with chocolate; I have to be one with the chocolate."

Joachim's works aren't the only sculptural sweets in town. Part of the tour at World of Chocolate shows sculptures made of pure chocolate in Austria, depicting wonders such as the Eiffel Tower and the Taj Mahal. And David Ramirez creates his own wonders as a confectioner and artist. He crafts centerpieces and display extravaganzas in his role as executive pastry chef at Rosen Shingle Creek Resort, and handcrafts thousands of artisan indulgences at night in his own David Ramirez Chocolates on Central Florida Parkway. "I love both sides," he says. "The centerpieces are my artistic side, and in the shop I can connect directly to people. It's all hospitality." As an award-winning pastry chef, Ramirez also trains students from Le Cordon Bleu College. "I get to be a dreamer, an engineer and an artist."



World of Chocolate boasts the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben and the Statue of Liberty sculpted out of chocolate. Below, Paul Joachim prefers the human (or Muppet) form as a chocolate model.



[LOCAL WHO'S WHO OF CHOCOLATE]

> **CHOCOLATE KINGDOM:** Tour a sweet factory in Kissimmee. chocolatekingdom.com

> **CHOCOLATE PROVOCATEUR:** Hand-crafted truffles and gifts at Infusion Tea in College Park. chocolateprovocateur.com

> **DAVID RAMIREZ CHOCOLATES:** Tempting confections from the multi-talented chocolate artisan. davidramirezchocolates.com

> **FARRIS AND FOSTER CHOCOLATE FACTORY:** Have a chocolate-making party in Baldwin Park. farrisandfosters.com

> **GHIRARDELLI:** World-famous candies and ice cream at Downtown Disney. ghirardelli.com

> **KILWIN'S:** Old-fashioned fudge and truffles. kilwins.com/celebration; kilwins.com/winterpark

> **PAT & TONI'S:** hand-dipped sweets from your childhood in DeLand. patandtonissweetthings.com

> **PETERBROOKE CHOCOLATIER, WINTER PARK:** Find practically anything dipped in chocolate. peterbrookewp.com

> **WORLD OF CHOCOLATE MUSEUM & CAFÉ:** The history of chocolate. worldofchocolatemuseum.com