

gourmet delights

Chocolate has long been a luxurious, delicious treat for the taste buds.



food for the gods

From ancient Aztec emperors to today's artisan chocolatiers, why European chocolate reigns supreme

by sarah gleim

You can ask all chocoholics what goes through their minds when they bite into a buttery, rich piece of chocolate, and the last thing they'll tell you is how the treat has a connection to the ancient Aztecs and even Christopher Columbus.

But that's exactly how chocolate got its start in 16th-century Europe. Columbus was the first European to be exposed to cocoa on his fourth voyage to the New World. He wasn't at all impressed with the stuff – which at the time was served as a spicy liquid of cocoa, cinnamon, aniseed and other fiery spices.



a drink to history

It wasn't until Hernán Cortés, another Spanish explorer, was introduced to xocolatl (chocolate) by Emperor Montezuma II in Mexico that it caught the interest of the Europeans. Cortés was unimpressed with xocolatl also, but unlike Columbus, he did see the value in the cacao beans. In 1528, he returned to Spain with, not only a treasure trove of cacao beans, but also the knowledge of how to harvest the trees.

The Spanish became fascinated with the new flavor and began mixing it with sugar and vanilla, which were natural together. Before long, the royals and nobles of the Spanish court were indulging in the rare and costly drink, which was always served cold, thick and frothy.

The Spanish were unwilling to share with other countries and managed to keep chocolate a secret for much of the 16th century. But little by little, word of it spread and travelers to Madrid began dis-

“The Swiss invented the fine, solid chocolate,” says Anil Rohira, executive pastry chef and corporate chef for Albert Uster Imports, importer and purveyor of fine Swiss specialty foods. “François Louis-Cailler opened the first mechanized chocolate factory; Charles Kohler developed hazelnut chocolate; Rudolf Sprüngli developed chocolates with filled centers; Daniel Peter and Henri Nestlé developed milk chocolate; Rudolphe Lindt invented the conching method (rolling the chocolate to help develop its flavor and texture); and Jean Tobler developed Toblerone. All of these men were Swiss.”

why it tastes so good

Nobody will argue the Swiss have a strong history and culture for couverture (the French term for chocolate used by chocolatiers and pastry chefs) – especially between 1890 and 1920 when the Swiss chocolate industry really began blossom-

ing. But who in Europe really makes the best chocolate today?

Well, the answer depends on whom you ask. A better question is why is one chocolate better than another? “Many things go into determining the quality of a good chocolate,” says Paul Bodrogi, certified executive pastry chef and culinary instructor at the Art Institute of Atlanta.

How the cacao bean is cultivated, fermented, evaluated, blended and roasted, plus the actual recipe, the purity of the chocolate and how long it is conched all determine quality. (For example, Swiss and Belgian chocolates, which are known for their smoothness, are sometimes conched for as long as 96 hours.) “All of these [factors] would be specific to each type of chocolate and each company that makes them,” Bodrogi says.

Also, local rules and regulations governing chocolate in European countries differ from those in the United States. “Swiss food laws and the Good Swiss Manufacturing Practice (an association of chocolate manufacturers) provide strict industry requirements and standards, which include indicating the accurate percentages of all ingredients within chocolate and premium couverture,” Rohira says. “The regulations in the United States are not as strict, allowing for additives and

“Belgians have been masters of sugar making for centuries. That’s one of the secrets of Belgian chocolate.”

covering the infamous chocolate drink.

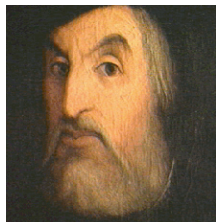
Throughout the next century, the chocolate drink was enjoyed by upper class Frenchmen, Italians and Spaniards; and chocolate houses sprang up across London – where it was always available to the public – then in Germany, Italy, Austria, Belgium and eventually Switzerland.

from the cup to the plate

It wasn't until Dutch chemist Coenraad van Houten invented a screw press that squeezed out the cocoa butter and left cocoa powder, that chocolate makers considered making it eatable. The Bristol, England apothecary of Joseph Fry & Sons (who eventually merged with Cadbury after WWI) was the first to make eatable chocolate, but it was the Swiss who revolutionized the process.

Neuhaus selects the finest ingredients from around the world.





Cortés was unimpressed with xocolatl, but he did see the value in the cacao beans.

various ingredients (such as hydrogenated fat) to be added to chocolate.”

And of course, the ingredients vary from region to region. “We select the finest ingredients from around the world,” says Daniel Stallaert, the maître chocolatier for Neuhaus in Belgium. “But the sugar comes from [Belgium]. Belgians have been masters of sugar making for centuries. That’s one of the secrets of Belgian chocolate.”

experience counts

It also doesn’t hurt that some of the world’s oldest chocolate companies are still thriving in Europe. Neuhaus in Belgium, for example, has remained one of the finest chocolate companies in the world since 1857 because of its consistent freshness and trademark all-natural ingredients.

Valhrona has also been making exceptional quality chocolates since 1924. Known as the specialist producer in the Rhone Valley in France, it created the chocolate grand cru, which uses only beans from the same origin. Some other fine French chocolate makers include Debauve & Gallais in



Paris and Z Chocolat in Aix-en-Provence.

And finally, Lindt & Sprüngli, one of the oldest Swiss chocolate companies, has been producing chocolates since Rudolphe Lindt developed his now-famous technique of conching in 1879. His “melting chocolate” soon achieved fame, and contributed significantly to the worldwide reputation of Swiss chocolate.

Smaller, independent chocolate makers throughout Europe also play a part in the high-quality products available. It is these artisan chocolate makers that often create the most delectable treats. There are hundreds of them in France alone, including Bernachon and Bernard Dufoux – both in Lyon; Christian Constant in Paris; Deleans in Reims; and Michel Chaudin, also in Paris.

Belgium also boasts its fair share of small artisan chocolatiers, including Mary Chocolatier and Wittamer – both in Brussels.

recognizing quality

So now we know the many factors that can make European chocolates so different, but how can you distinguish good chocolate from excellent chocolate? Simple. Chocolate should please all of your senses: smell, touch, sight, taste and feel.

When you remove the wrapper from a chocolate, you should smell a chocolaty aroma and see a shiny, rich, brown color. If instead it has a grayish-white appearance >

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Hernán Cortés brought cacao beans back to Spain in 1528.

are located. The merchandise offered for sale here is a cornucopia of treasures acquired from castles, palaces and private collections throughout the Old World.

At one shop alone, M. S. Rau's Antiques, potential buyers can check out Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany's personal silver service, Lady Astor's vanity, Louis XV's original plans for the invasion of England and Czar Nicholas II's wooden armoire, originally commissioned for the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg. Such pieces are obviously for those with deep pockets, but not everyone who wishes to shop for antiques on Royal Street has to have a seven-figure income. French Antiques, which specializes in elaborate chandeliers, may offer a cut glass and tear-drop crystal stunner for \$30,000, but it also has some with a \$3,000 price tag. At M. S. Rau's, you can begin your silver or china collection for less than \$1,000. At all of the shops, prices can vary, but quality never does.

In recognition of this, the Royal Street Guild was established in 1987, more than a century after the street's first antique shop, Waldhorn & Adler, opened its doors in 1881. Modeled after the medieval guilds in London, Amsterdam and Florence, the Royal Street Guild's mission is to ensure quality, tradition and integrity in all of the merchandise.

European Homes & Gardens recently visited with two of Royal Street's most knowledgeable antiques dealers – Arthur Harris of Dixon & Harris of Royal, who specializes in statuary, French and English furniture and fine paintings; and Neil Shapiro of Royal Antiques, who specializes in French and English traditional and provincial country furniture.

EH&G: What makes Royal Street so special for buying antiques?

NS: Well, several things really. First, New Orleans is considered the second-best market in the U.S. for purchasing high quality antiques, and nowhere else can you find the number of high-end shops packed together so densely in such a small area.

Second, many of the current owners are third generation so that in our ware-

houses, we often have pieces that were purchased by our grandparents. It would be hard, if not impossible, to go into business today with the volume of merchandise we already have in our inventories.

Because our families have always been close, we all work together in a spirit of cooperation that isn't often seen. Clients tell us that it's not intimidating to shop for antiques in New Orleans the way it is in some other cities.

EH&G: What do clients look for most?

NS: We specialize in beautiful, simple woods, so when they come into Royal Antiques, they are often looking for finely crafted country furniture, something that they will be comfortable with, rather than something that looks like it belongs in a museum.

AH: Our expertise is in French bronzes and sculpture. We have some wonderful Napoleon III and Louis Phillippe Restoration period pieces. Sculpture, which was fairly inexpensive up until five years ago, has risen in value during that time more than any other type of antique.

EH&G: What have been some of your most exciting finds?

AH: On my last trip, I was able to purchase a Mathurin Moreau bronze produced for Nicholas II prior to his coronation. It's one of the largest castings of this model – a woman sitting atop a two headed-eagle bearing crowns that symbolize the Russian empire. I was totally amazed.

NS: An 18th century Irish linen press made of the most beautiful mahogany I've ever seen.

EH&G: What do you look for on buying trips?

NS: I look for pieces that are fine quality, of course, but still affordable to a wide audience.

AH: Same here. It's difficult to get a signed Louis VX commode. I'm looking for a similar piece, but one that's not signed. Acquiring original period pieces is becoming very difficult, but we can still get amazing pieces in a similar style. ■

Chocolates

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(or bloom) that usually indicates the chocolate has either become too warm, or has come in contact with moisture.

If it's a bar of chocolate you're tasting, break it and listen to the sound it makes. "You should hear a crisp snap when you break it," Rohira says.

And when it comes to chocolate, just as with wine, there is a proper method to taste it. First, place a small amount on your tongue, and rather than chewing it, let it melt gently. "It should have a silky smooth texture that easily melts on your tongue, and it should have a round and harmonious flavor," Rohira says. It shouldn't be too gritty, greasy or waxy, and it should have a "good, long finish" (or pleasant aftertaste).

"You know you have a high quality chocolate when it meets those requirements," Rohira says.

the future

So what does the future hold for European chocolates? Well, history always seems to repeat itself, and that may be the case right now. It appears the idea of drinking chocolate is once again popular. "We recommend a 'drinkable' dessert after a filling dinner," Rohira explains. "Our Esprit Des Alpes chocolate is mixed with Grand Mamier or vodka and cream creating wonderful Esprit Des Alpes chocolate martinis."

Grand cru chocolates are produced from a single cocoa bean rather than a blend. "Just beware, grand cru does not indicate the quality of the product," Rohira says. "Many chocolate experts describe the flavor as flat, one-dimensional, edgy and above all, inconsistent because it depends on the crop of just one bean."

"[Many companies] are using high-end chocolates with beans from certain small regions that have distinct flavors," Bodrogi says. "It's almost like going to Starbucks and selecting a certain type of coffee."

European chocolatiers also are experimenting with unusual spices and different types of flavorings, including compounds and nut pastes, to create curious chocolate flavors such as wasabi, curry, cardamom, paprika and pepper. Who knew? ■