bliss, in a bar

Eating premium dark chocolate is an experience for the five senses.

by robyn pfarr ryan
High-quality dark chocolate bars, nibs and powder spotlight the essence of the cocoa bean.
or many of us, our love affair with chocolate began with the foil-covered morsels that we gorged on happily until our parents noticed. That was chocolate as candy.

Today, chocolate has become a premium artisanal product. Call it chocolate for grown-ups. Call it what you wish, just bring it here.

**Chocolate Lust**

Americans are in love with chocolate. Last year, we spent $15.8 billion on it. Each of us eats 12 pounds a year. Adult demand is booming for dark, generally defined as chocolate with a 60% or greater cacao (ka-roee) content from the bean and seeds, i.e. the raw ingredients.

Simply put, the cacao content, or percent cacao, indicates how much sugar has been added; for example, an 85% bar has 15% added sugar. Percent cacao also reflects the amount of both chocolate liquor and added cocoa butter, a formula that differs by brands and individual bars.

Specialty chocolate-makers use lower roasting temperatures and artisan techniques to create premium dark chocolate that spotlights, rather than masks, the inherent essence of the cacao bean. “This is chocolate at its purest form,” notes Thomas Linemayr, CEO and president of Swiss chocolatier Lindt & Sprungli (lindt.com).

Eating premium dark chocolate is an experience for the five senses. Bars range from dark brown to almost black with a glossy sheen. They are thin, feel smooth to the touch and snap crisply when broken. Delicate aromas hint of the chocolate's beginnings as cacao seeds in a tropical rainforest. As it slowly melts in your mouth, the multi-layered taste—more cocoa than overpoweringly sweet—lingers long after the last bite.

“Chocolate affects us on so many levels,” says Frederick Schilling, founding alchemist of Dagoba Organic Chocolate, Ashland, Ore. (dagoba.com). Dagoba offers a line of single-origin bars such as Xocolatl (74%), with chilies and nibs—the tasty bits that remain once roasted beans are deshelled.

**Unmasking the Bean**

Chocolate is made from cacao beans, really seeds, that grow inside pods on the delicate cacao tree, which flourishes within 20 degrees of the Equator. Each gangly-looking pod, which can be green, yellow, orange, red or purple, encases about 20 to 50 beans; about 200 beans are needed to produce a pound of chocolate.

Cacao is one of the most complex foods, containing well over...
Dark chocolate is generally considered to have a 60% or greater cacao content. 300 natural chemicals. “We try to be gentle and handle each bean the way it needs to be handled,” says Gary Guittard, president and CEO of the E. Guittard Chocolate Company, Burlingame, Calif., a chocolate company formerly known only by professional chefs that now offers a consumer line of 2-ounce single-origin high-cacao-content bars.

Because the cacao flavor defines high-content bars, each step from harvesting to processing takes on added importance. Cacao trees are delicate, needing humidity and shade protection from wind and elements. Trees are harvested by hand with a machete. Farmers then split the pods and pile the seeds into baskets or wooden crates, covering these with leaves for the fermenting process, which takes two to seven days. After the beans are dried in the sun, they are shipped in burlap bags to chocolate companies for processing. Many chocolate-makers travel to the country of origin and work with the farmers to get the highest-quality beans.

Once the beans are shipped, artisan chocolatiers roast them slowly at about 250 degrees F. (compared to the 400 degrees F. of mass-produced chocolate) to release the bean’s flavor potential, texture and exotic aroma. The final crucial step is conching, or constant stirring to fully develop and refine the flavor and texture. Premium dark chocolate is often conched for 72 hours.

**Taste the Origin**

Single-origin and variety bars are ideal for exploring the flavor complexity of cacao. These bars are made with beans from one region or country or only with beans from one of the three varieties of cacao trees: Criollo, a highly prized tree, Forastero, accounting for about 90% of the world’s supply, and Trinitario, a cross between the two. Cacao trees are generally planted under the shade canopy of a taller crop, such as coconut trees in Vietnam or teak trees in Ecuador. You can taste the flavors and aromas created by a region’s ecological factors, such as soil, rainfall, heat and nearby crops.

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*Schenk Pharmacy*’s
3-ounce Limited Edition
72% Cacao Las Islas
Caribbean Bar and Limited Edition 68% Cacao Kumasi Sambirano
(schenkpharmacy.com; $6.50 each)

Lake Champlain Chocolates’
3-ounce Select Origin bars:
Sao Thome (70%), Grenada (60%) and Tanzania (75%)
(lakechamplainchocolates.com; $4.50 each)

E. Guittard’s
2-ounce single-origin bars:
Ambanja, Sur del Lago, Chucuri and Quevado,
(all 65%; guittard.com; $3.89 each)

Ghirardelli’s
Intense Dark line:
Citrus Sunset (60%), with orange bits and caramel crunch, Espresso Escape (60%), with deep-roasted espresso beans and Twilight Delight (72%; ghirardelli.com; $2.99/3.3 ounces)
Recent research yields added good news for dark chocolate addicts: It is the most concentrated source of antioxidants, with levels four times higher than green tea, according to Dr. David Katz, director of the Prevention Research Center at Yale University School of Medicine. Dark chocolate is also rich in magnesium and fiber.

Katz's research has shown that healthy adults improve their blood pressure, insulin sensitivity and vascular function through daily moderate intake of dark chocolate, about 100 grams. Just don't forget to factor chocolate's high calorie content.

Says Katz, "It's a classic case of having your cake and eating it too, as long as it's dark chocolate cake."

Robyn Pforr Ryan's articles have appeared in Realbook, Brain, Child magazine and in Gannett newspapers.