

An Epicure's Guide to Dark Chocolate

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As with wine, there are numerous varieties and many quality levels ...

Fighting over chocolate? Yes, the world is crazy (and contentious) about dark chocolate boutique-style chocolates made with high cocoa content and rare, flavorful beans. Recently, the Italian chocolate maker, Amadei, struck a serious blow against its giant French rival, Valrhona, when they grabbed control of the legendary Chuao beans, perhaps the best Venezuelan cacao. Like single vineyard wine, there are now single-origin dark chocolates. Like varietals, there are chocolates made from an assortment of bean sources. And the winners in the battle of the beans are chocolate lovers, who now have a spectacular array of premium dark chocolate to please their palates.

When it was first consumed by the Aztecs as a drink made with exotic, magical cocoa powder, chocolate was dark and bitter. Emperor Montezuma introduced it to the Aztec's 16th century Spanish conquerors, who launched it in Europe. There it became a medicinal cocktail primarily for aristocrats, who sweetened it with honey. It has been devoured as a beverage for almost all of its 3,000-year history.

A number of significant events resulted in the affordable chocolate bar we devour today. In 1815 a Dutch chemist, Coenraad Van Houten, discovered a process to make cocoa powder, which simplified the manufacture of the first edible chocolate bar by J. S. Fry & Sons in the U.K. Thirty years later, Fry found a way to mix cocoa powder and sugar with melted cacao butter rather than with warm water making it easier to cast in a mold. They named it "Chocolat Délicieux à Manger" — the first chocolate candy bar.

Caramel maker Milton S. Hershey from Lancaster, Pennsylvania created the premier inexpensive, mass-produced bar almost 50 years later. But the transformation into the fine, smooth chocolate we currently enjoy was aided by two Swiss inventions. Rodolphe Lindt's machine for stirring and kneading or "conching" the chocolate mixture for three to four days improved the flavor and smoothness. (His machine was named a conche ... from the Latin word for its shell-like shape.) Tempering, or heating and cooling the chocolate, is the final step that produces the color, texture, and lack of graininess in premium dark chocolate.

Along the way, chocolate may have lost some of its mysteriousness, but those who thought it had medicinal qualities were on the right track. Now there is scientific proof that dark chocolate is good for you. Researchers have found that it contains some of the most potent antioxidants — flavonoids, more specifically, flavanols — that clear out free radicals and discourage inflammation. (Sorry, so far no aphrodisiac qualities, though it does improve your mood and increase your energy.) Luckily red wine is still one of the sources too. Expect more antioxidant flavanols with higher amounts of chocolate liquor and cocoa content.

Now you can follow the example of Aztec emperors and improve your health, but how should you go about finding the best dark chocolate?

HOW TO CHOOSE

Just as wine labels provide critical information, so too does chocolate packaging. Knowing how sweet or bitter you like your dark chocolate will help. The most important measure of that is the percentage of cocoa in the bar. It's usually printed on the label — the higher the better; more cocoa reduces the amount of sugar and other ingredients that overwhelm the natural cacao flavor making the chocolate more bitter. (Cacao is the plant; cocoa is the powder produced during processing and what the drink is made from.)

TOP TEN DARK CHOCOLATE BARS

- **AMEDEI CHUAO**, bitter chocolate extra, 70 percent
- **SCHARFFEN BERGER**, bittersweet pure dark chocolate, 70 percent
- **LAKE CHAMPLAIN SMALL WORLD CHOCOLATES**, Grenada, 60 percent
- **PARIS**, very dark chocolate, 77 percent
- **AMEDEI 9**, bitter chocolate extra, 75 percent
- **LAKE CHAMPLAIN SMALL WORLD CHOCOLATES** SAO THOME, 70 percent
- **HERSHEY'S**, extra dark, pure dark chocolate, 60 percent
- **VALRHONA MANJARI**, 64 percent
- **E. GUITTARD MADAGASCAR**, 65 percent
- **ENDANGERED SPECIES**, supreme dark chocolate, 72 percent

In the U.S. fine dark chocolate must have at least 35 percent dry cocoa solids (43 percent in the European Union), and may not contain any milk powder. Higher quality chocolates use cocoa butter. Unfortunately the E.U. now allows up to five percent vegetable fats, possibly from palm or other oils — without putting it on the label.

Look for a bar that identifies where the beans are from, just like a wine's provenance. Try a single-estate or single-origin bar from a specific region, such as our winner Amedei Chuao, which is from a Venezuelan peninsula (like "Burgundy" on a wine label). The founders, sister and brother team Cecilia and Alessio Tessieri, believe "that, as with great wines, great chocolate begins at its source, and, with the proper processing and preparation, can deliver an extraordinary, rich and sophisticated taste experience."

A plantation bar means the beans come only from one several-acre plantation, identical to a wine domaine. For instance, E. Guittard, Madagascar, 65 percent cocoa is from a single plantation near the town of Ambanja along the Northwest Coast of Madagascar. Country-of-origin bars indicate that the beans are from anywhere in a particular country.

With American wines, it is usually obvious which varieties are in a bottle. It's not so easy to know the kind of beans used to produce a dark chocolate. Look for artisanal or quality companies — Amedei, Scharffen Berger and Valrhona — who are known for using high-quality beans and use manufacturing methods designed to wrest the most cacao flavor out of well-processed beans. You want chocolate made with beans from the more flavorful, fragrant, delicate Criollo and Trinitario trees. Venezuela is among the best producers of quality beans — usually a combination of Criollo and Trinitario. Avoid the more common and less aromatic Forastero trees harvested from Africa's Ivory Coast and Ghana responsible for about 70 percent of the world's production. That's what most candy and the majority of non-premium chocolate makers use for the world's best selling brands including the popular Hershey's Kit Kat.

Most chocolate companies buy ready-made chocolate liquor, a paste from which ground, roasted bean meats (called nibs) is made, for their creations. But it's better to choose a producer who controls the cacao seed from harvesting to the final product, known as "bean to bar." Several of our choices are clearly in this category: Scharffen Berger, Amedei, and Valrhona — the latter two companies also have won a special award, "Best Bean to Chocolate Makers Bar," given by the Academy of Chocolate in 2005.

The ultimate test, of course, is personal taste, which is why it's useful to compare dark chocolates of comparable cocoa percentages. Start with 60 percent and increase the cocoa amount to get the most antioxidant benefits.

We assembled a panel of connoisseurs and foodies (with exceptional taste buds) to judge 21 of the world's prized dark chocolates, ranging from 54 to 85 percent cocoa, from 15 chocolate makers in seven countries. Over half of the finalists are American made, and the other four are from Italy, France, and Switzerland. Who would expect Hershey's to be keeping company with artisanal, award-winning Amedei?

60–65 PERCENT

- **HERSHEY'S EXTRA DARK, PURE DARK CHOCOLATE, 60 PERCENT COCOA [\$2.99, 5.1 OZ]:** Our tasters detected a lingering aroma that is both sweet and delicate, and rough and deep. Tastes ranged from burnt, roasted, bitter to very smooth to creamy to classic and earthy. Cinnamon notes on a long, velvety finish. Hershey's is now an over \$4 billion snack food manufacturer of chocolate and non-chocolate confectionery products headquartered in Hershey, Pennsylvania. They now own Scharffen Berger. www.hersheys.com
- **LAKE CHAMPLAIN SMALL WORLD CHOCOLATES GRENADA, 60 PERCENT COCOA, SINGLE ORIGIN [\$4.50, 3 OZ]:** A very rich cocoa aroma, the way a bittersweet chocolate should smell followed by a fruity, creamy, honey
- flavor and a well-rounded, pleasant finish. Grenada is the island where the beans are grown. Named after the lake where founder Jim Lampman owned the Ice House Restaurant, Lake Champlain Chocolates products include filled Belgian chocolates and truffles, milk chocolate bars, and hot chocolate. www.lakechamplainchocolates.com
- **VALRHONA MANJARI, 64 PERCENT COCOA [\$13.99, ONE LB]:** A rich, young, sweet coffee aroma. Many individual flavors from strong citrus, and dried fruit, to raisin and peaches. Finish varied from quickly fading to well-rounded. A combination of Madagascar's Criollo and Trinitario beans, now Manjari is just one of four different products Valrhona calls "Grand Crus," a range of their highest quality chocolate from specific areas, imitating the same label winemakers use to honor their finest wines from a particular vineyard.
- Valrhona, a pioneer in high quality chocolate for over 60 years, began selling to chocolatiers and pastry chefs in bulk, as couverture, grinding their own beans into either a block or liquid chocolate. Later they sold it to the public — in bars and squares, and as chocolate-coated coffee beans, fruit, nuts, and nougatine, among others. They are owned by Bongrain Société Anonym, a French food conglomerate. www.valrhona.com
- **E. GUITTARD, MADAGASCAR, 65 PERCENT COCOA, SINGLE PLANTATION [\$11.99, ONE LB]:** A bit of a milk chocolate aroma. Flavors slightly astringent, herbs such as rosemary, roasted caramel, vanilla, and caramelized sugar. Finish varied, but with hints of cocoa and perhaps a bit acidic. Certified kosher. Primarily Criollo beans. E. Guittard is an artisan line of chocolates made by Guittard Chocolate Company, family-owned and operated since its founding in San Francisco in 1868. Works directly with growers to develop crop, fermentation and drying of beans. www.guittard.com

70–72 PERCENT

- **AMEDEI CHUAO, 70 PERCENT COCOA, HAND-NUMBERED, LIMITED-EDITION BAR, SINGLE ORIGIN [\$12, 1.75 OZ]:** A cocoa and cognac aroma with an almost ripe, fresh cherry taste, just shy of bitter. The berry taste gets stronger and it has a creamy long finish. A classic dark chocolate from perhaps the best Venezuelan cacao found only on a small peninsula. Double gold award-winner in the 2005 world chocolate awards: “Best Dark Chocolate Bar” and “Best Bean to Bar Chocolate Makers Bar.” www.academyofchocolate.org.uk/chocolate/awards.html They also make various chocolate bars, pralines, truffles, and I Cru Collection, their highest quality chocolate. www.amedei-us.com
- **SCHARFFEN BERGER BITTERSWEET PURE DARK CHOCOLATE, 70 PERCENT COCOA [\$3.79, 3 OZ]:** An espresso aroma, and stronger coffee flavor. Flavors also of a little fruit, and a touch of honey, with a very nice mouthfeel. A Cabernet-like, creamy, velvety finish that can be bitter and astringent. Their signature dark chocolate is created from nine different cacao bean sources. Since 1996, this California-based company locates the best beans, and in their Berkeley factory processes them in small batches, making the chocolate liquor, and then conching, tempering, and molding them into bars. Hershey’s now owns them. Also, they sell limited edition, baking, milk, flavored chocolate, cocoa powder, and candy. www.scharffenberger.com
- **ENDANGERED SPECIES CHOCOLATE, LLC, SUPREME DARK CHOCOLATE, 72 PERCENT COCOA, ETHICALLY TRADED [\$2.75, 3 OZ]:** Dried fruit, cocoa, spicy, even flat aroma. A very rich cinnamon, roasted, bitter not balanced flavor. Finish was pleasant, astringent, gritty, lingers well. Certified kosher. A chimpanzee, from artist Judi Rideout, is on the cover of the package, the inside of which is covered with environmental information about the plight of the animal.

*“Nine out of every
ten persons say they love
chocolate. The tenth lies.”*
— *Anthelme Brillat-Savarin*

This Indianapolis company donates ten percent of net profits to help support species, habitat, and humanity. www.chocolatebar.com

- **LAKE CHAMPLAIN SMALL WORLD CHOCOLATES SAO THOME, 70 PERCENT COCOA, SINGLE ORIGIN [\$4.50, 3 OZ]:** A coffee, buttery aroma, with a variety of tastes including very deep, rich blackberry, a lot of fruit, creamy, and earthy. A long buttery, perhaps slightly sour finish. Named after the island Sao Thome, where the beans are grown.
- **AMEDEI 9, 75 PERCENT COCOA, BLENDED BEANS [\$12, 1.75 OZ]:** It is complex with a fruity aroma, and a long finish, a very pleasing aftertaste. A combination of cocoa from nine plantations. Tied with Lake Champlain Sao Thome, it won the silver in the “Best Dark Chocolate Bar” and bronze in the “Best Bean to Bar Chocolate Makers Bar” categories of the 2005 world chocolate awards.
- **PARIS VERY DARK CHOCOLATE, 77 PERCENT COCOA, ORGANIC [\$25, 1.76 LB]:** A popular choice with very different flavors including nutty, coffee ground, cinnamon, pepper, Port, earthy, with fruit and jasmine notes. Finish varied from coffee to very creamy to a slightly strange, maybe coconut finish. It had the same score as Lake Champlain Grenada. A Swiss manufacturer, John Paris, chocolatier and hot air balloonist, started Paris Chocolates, Inc., in 1987. Their fair

75–77 PERCENT

trade organic chocolate liquor, made from organic Costa Rican Criollo beans, is the foundation of this chocolate that includes Bourbon vanilla. They make Flyer, Gold Plan, and Paris brands of Swiss chocolate bars and professional eating and cooking couvertures, ready-to-melt chocolate used by chocolatiers. www.flyerchocolate.com ☞

Chef Judy Mattera's Chocolate Hazelnut Torta

A nut cake showcasing the flavor of 70% bittersweet chocolate with a slight moist interior from addition of Port. (Judy was also on our chocolate tasting panel.)

- 8 oz. bittersweet chocolate (Valrhona, El Rey), chopped
- 4 oz. butter, unsalted
- 2 oz. hazelnuts, skinned and toasted
- 2 tb confectionery sugar
- 4 eggs
- Pinch of salt
- ¼ cup sugar
- ¼ cup hazelnut praline paste
- 3 tb Port
- 1 tsp vanilla extract

Melt chocolate and butter over double boiler. Reserve.

Process hazelnuts with confectionery sugar until fine.

In mixer, whisk together eggs, pinch of salt, and sugar until triple in volume and pale yellow in color.

Add to cool chocolate, the praline paste, processed hazelnuts, Port, vanilla extract.

Fold egg mixture into chocolate. Ladle into buttered 4 oz. ramekins.

Bake at 350 degrees for 15–17 minutes.

Best served slightly warm with dollop of whipped cream, assorted berries or a blackberry compote and hazelnut crema (optional).

Yields 10 individual cakes.