

# CONNOISSEURS OF CHOCOLATE

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

The door to Serenade Chocolatier in Brookline opens with a jingle, and a visitor's late-winter scowl evaporates immediately when he steps inside - the place smells like an enormous cup of cocoa. He walks across the white-and-mauve checkerboard floor, past red-satin-draped tables holding gift-wrapped chocolates, and stops in front of the display case. Cherries dipped in chocolate, with stems straight up, nuzzle next to half-dipped plump apricots. Piles of truffles are infused with champagne or liqueur, or simply enriched with butter. There are tiny chocolates shaped like gift boxes, filled with rich cremes; and an oversize, open, heart-shaped box made of chocolate. Owner Nur Kilic says it can be stuffed with 10 pounds of chocolates, "for someone

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really in love." The price? \$100.

At shops such as Serenade and Winand Chocolaterie Suisse in Concord, at restaurants from casual Moon Woman Cafe in Newton to haute-cuisine L'Espalier in the Back Bay, at gourmet shops, supermarkets and even the checkout counter at the convenience store, more people are choosy about chocolate. Americans, it seems, are developing a taste for premium chocolate and chocolate desserts - satiny smooth, complex in flavor and not too sweet.

Luxurious chocolates and chocolate desserts meet America's increasing desire for affordable indulgence and a mounting need to escape, researchers say. And just as more of us have learned the differences between French Roast and Breakfast Blend, pure and extra-virgin, Wonder and sourdough, we're becoming more sophisticated about choco-

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late. "There's definitely a trend toward quality in chocolate over the last few years," says Frank Cardullo of Cardullo's gourmet shop in Harvard Square, which carries a wide variety of top-quality chocolates. At Cardullo's, as well as at Teaberries in Newburyport and other gourmet shops, proprietors say that people are asking for chocolate by brand name, something that didn't happen a few years ago. "It's like they're buying fine wine."

Demand for premium chocolate took off in the '80s, chocolate-industry representatives and analysts say, when everything was "status, status, status." Now, the popularity of top-quality chocolate has continued to grow even though status has become a dirty word and the overall chocolate market is flat.

Expensive chocolate is still perceived as "one of the ultimate pleasures in life," says Barbara Caplan, a market analyst at Yankelovich Partners in Westport, Conn., but its appeal is its flavor, not its status-conscious image. What people think is: "Oh boy, are you lucky you're wrapping your mouth around this delectable, sinful, wonderful kind of food."

Sellers of top-quality chocolate consider this "sinful" conduct a blessing. Premium chocolate was the "hot seller" among specialty foods for 1993, according to Gourmet News, a newspaper for the gourmet industry, in Yarmouth, Maine. The previous year's hot products? Healthy snacks.

Chocolate shops, too, are doing well. While chocolate sales are stagnant overall, sales of premium chocolate are growing. At Serenade, sales were up 20 percent last year. Owner Nur Kilic says that's "very significant," since business was flat for the

## The right stuff

Pastry chefs and chocolatiers stress that chocolate desserts will only be as good as the chocolate used to make them. Some of their preferred brands are Callebaut, Peter's and Lindt. These brands, as well as lemon and orange oils, dried cranberries and cherries and other ingredients called for in the recipes, are available at Dairy Fresh Candies on Salem Street in the North End, as well as at gourmet shops.

previous three years. Cloud Nine Inc., of Hoboken, N.J., expects to sell \$4 million worth of espresso-bean, dried raspberry, cookies-and-cream and other chocolate bars this year, up from \$3 million last year.

Americans may want to eat healthier, but they want to do it on their own terms, and they also want to give themselves a treat, say analysts such as Art Siemering, publisher of Trend/Wire, a Kansas City-based newsletter that focuses on food and beverages. So they're eating premium chocolate. "There's a sophisticated, wonderful feeling associated with chocolate," says Joan Steuer, president of Chocolate Marketing Inc. in Los Angeles. "People talk about words like 'mouthfeel,' and about the before-and-after experience of eating chocolate. They say it's romantic and it takes them away."

In restaurants, of course, these people want more than a chocolate bar to end a meal. Pastry chefs all over Greater Boston say a "serious, intense" chocolate dessert - home-spun or sophisticated - is popular ev-

ery night of the week, adding that these desserts usually outsell all the others.

Desserts that evoke some of the flavors of childhood also are in demand, such as the ice cream sandwich with bittersweet chocolate chip and orange zest cookies, espresso ice cream and cognac-spiked hot fudge sauce served at Moon Woman Cafe in Newton. "One of the big things in the '80s was fancy-schmancy desserts like chocolate terrines," says June Jacobs, who teaches a course in cooking with chocolate at the Boston Center for Adult Education. "Now people want simple things like chocolate pudding." They also want to be sinful when it comes to dessert, but just a bit. So, Hamersley's Bistro in the South End offers a *peche mig-non*, or "little vice" - a collection of three miniature chocolate desserts, such as pot au creme, truffles and tiny pastry.

Although grand chocolate desserts have not gone out of style, they're often lighter in flavor than they used to be. Chocolate cake is lightly brushed with tea at Al Forno Restaurant in Providence. Chefs also are using herb flavors such as basil and tarragon - not just mint - with chocolate. At L'Espalier, in the Back Bay, an almost flourless chocolate cherry torte with white chocolate creme is updated with a splash of the herbal liqueur Chartreuse.

Many restaurants are also carrying the desire to use local seasonal ingredients through to the end of the meal. At Providence Restaurant in Brookline, a warm, chocolate pudding-like cake is served with a dried-cranberry compote. That's a twist on a similar dessert served without cranberries at Olives Restaurant in Charlestown.

Serenade's Nur Kilic suspects that there's more than a grain of truth to the purported physiological effects of chocolate. "It's hard for me to know, though" she says, her face streaked with chocolate as she mixes lemon oil, macadamia nuts and dried cranberries into a bowl of melted bittersweet, "because I eat chocolate every day."

"But," she adds, with a gleam in her big steel-blue eyes, "I'm not a person who gets depressed very often."