

HOT chocolate

Why Central Jersey women are sweet on chocolate-tastings

There is no edible as bewitching as chocolate, with its velveteen richness and pungent aroma. Few can resist its dizzying capacity to engulf taste buds as it melts in the mouth. Who among us hasn't experienced Zen-like moments of savoring a bar in solitude?

Nowadays, however, it is insufficient to simply plant oneself in the bittersweet or milk-chocolate camps. A cursory glance at even supermarket brands reveals fancy labels touting organic ingredients, remote and exotic origins and cocoa percentages — now all used as markers of quality.

So what constitutes a truly superior piece of the confection?

"Not all chocolates are born equal," said culinary historian Maricel E. Presilla, author of "The New Taste of Chocolate."

A Weehawken resident and co-owner and chef of Cucharamama and Zafrá in Hoboken, Presilla said quality chocolate can be identified in part by its cacao, the dried beans of tropical American evergreen trees used to make chocolate.

Discerning from the three types of cacao is therefore essential. The Forastero bean, said Presilla, is the "workhorse of the industry." It's the most abundant because it comes from the tree that is the sturdiest and least susceptible to diseases.

Criollo is the most expensive and has the most delicate flavor.

"Those are the Rolls Royces," she said. "There

are very few trees available — only Venezuela really has a sizable population."

The third, the Trinitario bean, is a hybrid, having characteristics of the other two.

Consumers are becoming savvy to those finer details, and their interest in premium chocolates is rising.

This is driven in part by scientific studies that have found that dark chocolate contains healthy antioxidants. This, along with an appreciation of gourmet foods, has led to a 72 percent increase in premium dark-chocolate consumption from 2001 to 2005, to \$91 million, according to A.C. Nielsen research.

Total dark chocolate sales rose 42 percent during the same time period, to \$288 million.

Bernard Pacyniak, editor-in-chief of Candy Industry magazine, noticed the trend toward quality and sophistication when he attended the International Sweets and Biscuits Fair in Cologne, Germany, last month.

"It seemed everyone at the fair was developing a smarter, healthier, tastier and more convenient type of chocolate," Pacyniak said. He noted a definite interest in further developing chocolates that have higher polyphenol antioxidant content.

Devour and discuss

What better way to learn about the healthy dividends of chocolate than to attend tastings, which are fast becoming *de rigueur* in

Central Jersey?

Diane Pinder, chocolatier of Donna and Company in Cranford, showcases chocolate as an artisanal food to both devour and discuss.

"Chocolate is becoming one of those connoisseur things, sort of like wine," said Pinder, a former nurse whose love of chocolate led her to open her own shop.

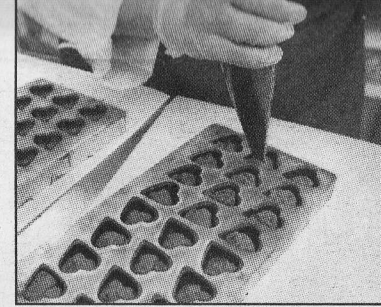
Pinder favors events that are intimate, with no more than 12 to 15 attendees. She uses only dark chocolate; milk chocolate, she said, has too much fat and is too sweet, which detracts the taster's ability to distinguish different flavors. Tasters are each given bottles of water to cleanse their palate between each sample.

"We'll start out tasting chocolates from different manufacturers, but I won't tell them the names of the manufacturers," Pinder said. Tasters are seated for the festivities and asked to treat themselves to one chunk from each of the plates as they are passed around.

Pinder guides her guests in how to properly taste each morsel for maximum effect. She likens the process to wine tasting.

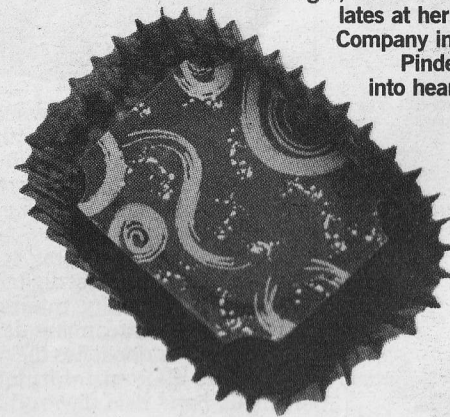
"First, you look at it. You smell it, and then you start to taste it," Pinder said. "You roll it around in your mouth to distinguish the different flavors. Then, you describe how it feels in your mouth — how the textures differ from piece to piece."

Pinder's selections vary from lesser-known, more exclusive brands to mainstream staples. A



KATHY JOHNSON/COURIER NEWS

At right, Diane Pinder selects chocolates at her store, Donna and Company in Cranford. Above, Pinder pours chocolate into heart-shaped moulds.



recent tasting included Scharffen Berger, an American premium brand; Valrhona, which is French; samples of organic bars and the supermarket favorite, Godiva.

Pinder points out the differences in cocoa content ratios, explaining how to distinguish between what is semi-sweet and what is bittersweet. She also talks about how chocolate is harvested and processed. The crowd thus gains perspective on a spectrum of flavors, beans and origins.

Most of all, Pinder said she likes to talk about the health benefits.

"I think it's the nurse in me. I tell them that dark chocolate in a truffle is not going to be healthy because a truffle has a lot of other stuff in it."

Still, Pinder will make them — this month's featured chocolate in her shop is a sinful red raspberry puree truffle, which she said is excellent when paired with a red raspberry wine.

Barbara Seelig Brown, a culinary educator who teaches healthy cooking classes, said chocolate's new renaissance is due in part to the marketing bandwagon effect of "putting a healthy spin on something we've never thought is healthy. This is as opposed to everyone thinking that chocolate is just sugar and fat."

Crunching the health-study numbers, however, only goes so far in education oneself about the myriad sumptuous choices.

"In the end," said Presilla, whose knowledge of chocolate is exhaustive, "no matter how much you read, you have to eat."