



Chocolate Unveiled

*Paola Westbeek
looks at chocolate's
rich history and
how to use it to
create romantic
dishes and treats*

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WHILE DINING at a hip 'n' happening plant-based restaurant in Norway a few years ago, I was deliciously captivated by the gastronomic prowess of the young, bright chef who had managed to make the place a huge success in the few short months since its opening. Every dish delighted the senses with an unsurpassable level of creativity, and, as each course progressed, I became ever more smitten. Especially when this culinary wunderkind placed before me a dish consisting of a small wedge of blue cheese crowning a delicate chocolate biscuit. I then watched in awe and admiration as he deftly drizzled it with dark, molten chocolate. To this day I can still recall how the bitter chocolate complemented the smoky pepperiness of the cheese. It dawned on me that chocolate is one of the most versatile—not to mention intriguing—foods. One which we often take for granted, not realising that up until the

second half of the 19th century, we were pretty much deprived of its many pleasures.

Though chocolate was introduced to Europe via Spain in the early 16th century, it was a commodity only few could afford. Much like with coffee and tea, sipping chocolate was a privilege reserved for the well-heeled, who served the drink in fine china and made it more palatable with exotic ingredients such as cinnamon, vanilla, chilli

and it helps to digest ill humours” (*The Indian Nectar, or, A Discourse Concerning Chocolata*, 1662).

In 1828, Dutchman Casparus van Houten invented the cocoa pressing method, a development that not only made chocolate tastier but also easier to mass produce. Using a hydraulic press, he separated the fat from the cocoa solids, which were then turned into a powder that was treated with alkaline salts, neutralising the acids and

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pepper, aniseed and other costly spices. But chocolate beverages weren't only chic. They were also believed to promote good health and lift the spirits. In the 17th century, doctors often prescribed chocolate to their patients, firmly believing in the drink's restorative properties. Henry Stubbe, physician to King Charles II, called hot chocolate “one of the most wholesome drinks”. It treated everything from stomach aches to coughs and, he wrote, “conduceth much to the lengthening of life; the reason is, because it yields good nourishment to the body,



softening the flavour. This process became known as “Dutching” and resulted in an easily soluble powder that could be used to make a better digestible, less heavy chocolate drink. Additionally, the cocoa butter was used to make candy bars and other confections. The chocolate revolution had started in earnest and continued in the hands of chocolate barons like Richard Cadbury (who travelled to the Netherlands to buy a cocoa press from Van Houten), Henri Nestlé and Milton Hershey.

More than just an ingredient in desserts, a hot drink or confectionary, chocolate can be

used in myriad savoury dishes. In fact, in my kitchen, a bar of high-quality dark chocolate (at least 82 per cent) and a tub of cocoa powder are just as indispensable as garlic, sea salt and good olive oil. I add squares of chocolate to my hearty bean chillis, letting them slowly melt as they infuse the dish with incredible richness and balance the bold flavours with silky sweetness. In tomato-based stews and sauces, chocolate tempers the acidity and even acts as a thickener. Homemade barbecue sauce without the delicious complexity of chocolate? Simply unthinkable.

When roasting root vegetables, I often make a marinade of thick balsamic syrup, cocoa powder and thyme, loosening it with a shot of red

wine or port. Trust me, after trying this, glazed carrots or parsnips will pale in comparison.

Robust Mediterranean herbs such as rosemary and lavender tend to go very well with chocolate. This Valentine's Day, if you're really in the mood to spoil that special someone (or yourself), try infusing your chocolate mousse with a sprig of rosemary and then finishing it off with a few flakes of fleur de sel. Or, add a teaspoon or two of dried (edible) lavender to your favourite chocolate cookie recipe. A glass of Banyuls (a warm and unctuous fortified wine from the south of France) will make either of these tasty treats—or anything with chocolate, for that matter—all the more delightful. ■



Year Of The Dragon

Chinese New Year falls on February 10, 2024 and will usher in the Year of the Dragon in the Chinese zodiac signs—specifically the Year of the Wood Dragon

Recent years of the Dragon have included 2012, 2000 and 1988. The next Dragon year will be in 2036 (Year of the Fire Dragon)

In London, February 11 will see the biggest Chinese New Year celebrations outside Asia, with a colourful parade, free performances and tasty Chinese food

SOURCE: CHINESENEWYEAR.NET AND VISITLONDON.COM