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Is Chocolate a Healthy Choice?

BY LISË STERN

According to the National Confectioners' Association, the earliest recorded connection between chocolate and health dates to the 1500s. And according to a [press release](#) that came across my desk today, the latest dates to March 24, 2015.

But when I was a kid, health benefits were last thing from my mind – and my mouth – when I thought about chocolate. I reveled in milk chocolate – my dad would bring back bars of creamy deliciousness from Switzerland, which I would savor slowly, breaking off squares every few days and making one bar last for weeks.

My affinity changed in college, however – showing the power of a simple suggestion. My roommate Jane said to me, “Why have milk chocolate, when you can have dark?” Why indeed, I thought, and immediately switched allegiances. Jane confessed that at times she even preferred all out unsweetened baking chocolate.

While it took a few years (coughdecadescough) for me to enjoy chocolate in that purest form, I did develop an appreciation for bittersweet. This was real chocolate to me, a little bit went a very long way; and the milky stuff I used to nibble tasted like sugary candy. For an unadulterated shot of chocolate intensity, the darker the better.

Jane's inclination turns out to have been prescient. As the 20th century merged into the 21st, [epidemiological studies](#) on the health benefits of chocolate began to be published in scientific journals, and in mainstream publications. Professor Emmanuel Ohene Afoakwa, of the University of Ghana, wrote in his 2010 volume, *Chocolate Science and Technology*, “The findings indicate that flavonoids in cocoa may decrease low-density lipoprotein (‘bad’ cholesterol) oxidation, helping to prevent cardiovascular diseases. In addition, cocoa’s high content in antioxidants has been proved to reduce the risk of cancer. The demand for dark and high cocoa content chocolate, in particular, has surged in response to these positive findings.”



Credit: Dandelion Chocolate

The Fall and Rise of Chocolate

The chocolate of the 1500s was not the chocolate we know today. For one thing, it was consumed as a beverage. And it was not sweetened. But as chocolate manufacturing developed in Europe in the 1800s, sugar was introduced, and milk added, along with technology, and bars became the primary form of chocolate consumption.

As chocolate developed and grew in popularity in the U.S., it got sweeter and sweeter. Consider the definition of American milk chocolate: it must have a minimum of 10 percent cocoa solids. The cocoa solids are where all the health benefits are. That other 90 percent is mainly sugar and milk (European milk chocolate must have 20 to 25 percent cocoa). Studies determined that chocolate should have at least 70 percent cocoa for us to gain the promised health benefits.

Since around 2000, darker and darker options have been introduced – to the point where sugar was sometimes eliminated altogether. Food writer [Julia Moskin](#) wrote in a 2008 *New York Times* article, “The 100 percent cacao bars that have arrived recently on the market are virtually inedible, but are no less joyfully greeted by connoisseurs who worship their intensity and purity.”

Paleo blogger [Justin Miller](#) is one such connoisseur. He wrote in “The Paleo Guide to Dark Chocolate,” at [theultimatepaleoguide.com](#), “Unsweetened, AKA baker’s, AKA heaven, AKA yum, yum, gimme sum: Unsweetened or baker’s chocolate is for the rebel, the misfit, the thrill seeker.... It contains almost no sugar and has a taste that is extremely bitter. I LOVE IT! So much so that I’d shout it from the rooftops.”

Think of unsweetened chocolate like wine. You can work your way up to it – start with 70 percent, move on to 80, 90, savoring the complex flavors in the chocolate itself. You can have an appreciation for these unsweetened options. Miller comments, “If you are worried about the bitterness of dark chocolate, don’t be, especially if you’ve been doing the paleo thing for a little while. The lower sugar intake should have reset your palate and your taste buds should be operating normally now.”

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And there’s been some breaking news in the chocolate world, announced March 24, 2015, at the 249th National Meeting & Exposition of the American Chemical Society in Denver. There, Dr. Afoakwa announced that they had [a eureka moment regarding chocolate processing](#). Their studies revealed that new methods could enhance the health benefits of chocolate. That is, storing the harvested cocoa pods for five to seven days before roasting and fermenting, plus roasting for a longer time at a lower temperature, yielded cocoa with a higher number of antioxidants (the stuff that gives chocolate its health benefits) than cocoa processed in the traditional manner (immediate roasting after harvesting). Further, the storage step “allowed the sweet pulp surrounding the beans inside the pod to alter the biochemical and physical constituents of the beans before the fermentation,” according to a press release, which enhances the flavor of the chocolate itself, giving it a naturally sweeter edge.

I look forward to the implementation of this technique throughout the chocolate-growing world.



Cacao Plants with Chocolate Fruit Pods

Bean to Bar

Twenty years ago, there were just over a dozen chocolate manufacturers in the U.S., that is, companies that produce chocolate from the cocoa bean. Two are in California, [Ghirardelli](#) (which started in San Francisco in 1852) and [Guittard](#) (also started in San Francisco, in 1868). All were large – these included Hershey’s and Nestlé’s.

But isolated chocophiles here and there wanted to take chocolate back to its roots. Chocolate with simple ingredients, chocolate identified by its source country, chocolate produced with minimal additives – even chocolate with non sugar sweeteners. The 21st century has seen the rise of craft chocolatiers, and many are in the Bay area.

Is artisanal bean-to-bar chocolate that much better? I’d say yes, on a few levels. First, these chocolate makers work hard to source their chocolate, looking for plantations that treat the farmers well. Many use Fair Trade and organic chocolate. Just as coffee from different locations in the world has different flavor profiles, so too does chocolate. And these companies tend to produce fabulous tasting very dark chocolate, 70 percent cocoa and higher. Ingredients are straightforward: cacao (which includes both cocoa and cocoa butter), sugar, maybe salt or vanilla. Consider visiting or sampling chocolate from the following California craft chocolatiers. Most, but not all craft chocolate, veer towards using more natural ingredients. When choosing a chocolate, you’ll want to read the label to sniff

out unsavory less natural ingredients such as high fructose corn syrup and artificial colors and flavors.

These are a few of our favorite chocolates from in and around California.

Note: I found many of these chocolates (and more) at the [Rainbow Grocery](#) on Folsom Street in San Francisco.



Credit: L'Amourette Chocolate website

Alegio Chocolate, Claudio Corallo, in Palo Alto, is a labor of love for owner Corallo, who grows cocoa on his property in Africa. The chocolate is priced like gold, but the taste is like some incredible vintage wine. Nearly all the chocolates they produce – many with flavors like salt and pepper or ginger – are 70 percent and higher. They also have a small shop in Berkeley.

Coracao Confections, based in Emeryville, CA, Coracao produces raw chocolate sweetened with naturally low-glycemic coconut sugar. The chocolate is all 81 percent. They also make chocolate confections, like caramels, all vegan, and again using coconut sugar. You can often find them, as I did, at area farmers' markets.

Cello Chocolate in Nevada City, CA produces six single-origin 70 percent plus bars from the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Ghana, Peru, Trinidad, and Venezuela.

Dandelion Small Batch Chocolate in the Mission District of San Francisco is a café as well as a chocolate factory. When you enter, you see all the manufacturing equipment right behind the ordering counter. Bars are displayed on shelves, with samples of many varieties. All are identified by origin, and you can appreciate the differences between, say, a 70

percent Madagascar vs. a 70 percent Venezuela bar. Available in [70, 85, and 100 percent](#), with more options in the store than online.

Dick Taylor Craft Chocolate, located way up north in Arcata, CA is the brainchild of former carpenters Adam Dick and Dustin Taylor, who started making their chocolate in 2010. They now make seven bars, all 72 percent and higher, and received a Good Food award in 2014.

L'Amourette Chocolatier in San Francisco has creative flavors in addition to the straight dark chocolate. There are several super dark single origins – 70, 72, 85, 91, 100 percent. The 91 percent Extra Smooth Dark Chocolate was [raved about by Michelle Tam](#) on her [nomnompaleo.com](#) blog. I agree, smooth and flavorful. They also make several creative flavored bark bars, like Exotic Berry (with Goji, Acai, Sea Buckthorn) and Candied Pomelo Peel.

Sacred Chocolate in Novato, CA has been making raw, alternatively sweetened vegan chocolate since 2006, and they claim to be “the first chocolate manufacturer in human history to create a raw (low-temperature processed), organic, finely tempered chocolate bar.” [Hefty 5-pound bars](#) come in other percentages as well.

Scharffen Berger was one of the very first artisanal chocolate manufacturers, started in San Francisco in 1997. They have since been acquired by Hershey's, which gives me pause, but that ownership does not seem to have changed the chocolate itself, or the principles of connecting directly to the chocolate growers. And they were the first company to sell cocoa nibs – the crushed cocoa beans used to make chocolate. Look for their [70, 72, and 82 percent chocolates](#), or go for the [99 percent unsweetened](#).

Tcho, another early micro chocolate maker, was founded in 2005. *The Economist* calls them “a technology firm that makes chocolate” – principals came from NASA and *Wired* magazine. Tcho's growing popularity is moving it beyond the craft/micro status – they just vacated their Pier 17 factory in San Francisco for a move to larger digs in Berkeley. That doesn't diminish the worth of their chocolate, and you can still see the greatest variety of choices at their Westfield Mall location on Market Street in San Francisco. Note: Tcho chocolate does have soy lecithin added. For best health benefits, go for the [70, 84, and 99 percent varieties](#).

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