

CHOCOLATE

FOOD OF THE GODS

By Claudia Alarcon

Photography courtesy of Crave Artisan Chocolate



Chocolate, one of the world's most beloved foodstuffs, is also one of the most intriguing. From its unique botanical characteristics to its complex history and symbolic nature, cacao holds a special place in the world's gastronomy. After all, it wasn't an accident that Carl Linnaeus named the cacao tree Theobroma, meaning "food of the gods." It is important to note that the term cacao refers to the plant or its fruit and beans before processing, while chocolate refers to products made from the beans.

In the book *The True History of Chocolate*, Sophie and Michael Coe argue that the earliest linguistic evidence of chocolate consumption dates back three or even four millennia to the pre-Columbian cultures of Mesoamerica, although the tree is native to the Amazon basin. No one knows exactly when the first person turned cacao beans into a beverage, but there is archeological evidence that the ancient cultures of Mexico used cacao in a variety of drinks, gruels, porridges, powders and solid substances, flavored with native ingredients such as vanilla, chiles, honey, annatto, allspice and the flowers of various Mesoamerican trees. The cacao tree figures prominently in Classic Maya mythology, depicted in ceramic vessels and stone carvings as a sacred image. Both the Maya and Aztec considered cacao valuable enough to use as currency, and reserved its consumption to the elite.

After the Conquest, the Spaniards modified the beverage to their taste adding cane sugar to balance the bitterness and substituting native flavorings with familiar ones such as cinnamon, anise and black pepper. By the 17th century, chocolate was a fashionable drink throughout Europe, believed to have nutritious, medicinal and even aphrodisiac properties, and it remained a privilege of the rich until the Industrial Revolution made mass production possible. In 1828, a Dutch chemist named Coenraad Van Houten patented his method for removing most of the cacao butter from processed cacao

(known as "liquor") through a hydraulic press, reducing the amount of cacao butter to about 27 percent and leaving a solid that could be pulverized into a fine powder to which he added alkaline salts. This product became known as Dutch cocoa. The first modern chocolate bar is credited to Joseph Fry, who in 1847 discovered that he could make a moldable chocolate paste by adding melted cacao butter back into Dutch cocoa.

Why is chocolate so alluring? "The scientist in me has a logical answer: chocolate contains phenethylamine — the same chemical your brain produces when you're in love," says Mary Collazo of San Antonio's Chocollazo. "Personally, I believe the allure lies in the timelessness and familiarity of it. Deep-seated traditions like Easter baskets, heart-shaped boxes with assorted chocolates, chocolate coins, etc., all tie back to happy childhood memories."

The chocolatier carries about 10 truffle flavors and other confections like caramel sea turtles, hand-painted chocolate bars (with inclusions ranging from potato chips to gummy bears to locally roasted Ethiopian coffee beans), and a chipotle English toffee. They shake things up seasonally with items like European-style drinking chocolate prepared tableside in a French press, a hot hatch chile truffle available during HEB's Hatch Chile Festival in August, and a beef jerky chocolate bar developed specially for San Antonio's Meat Week. Chocollazo's chocolate-covered bacon bouquets are a hit for Valentine's Day, and one of their most successful creations

is a bacon-German chocolate truffle. "I take pride in offering something fresh and off-the-beaten path like Guinness Stout infused chocolates. Thai iced tea and a pb&j truffle are currently in the works."

"Chocolate is a very unique and special ingredient that immediately evokes words and feelings of love, happiness, health and well-being in everyone," says veteran Austin chocolatier Krystal Craig. "For me, handcrafting artisan chocolate products has always been alluring because the challenge and skill it takes to work with chocolate keeps the mind extremely stimulated. Chocolate is a strangely sensitive ingredient that requires patience and understanding. The final product is so beautiful, and can be enjoyed through multiple senses."

Craig, who has been making chocolate since 2005 and founded Crave Artisan Chocolate in 2012, prefers to eat chocolate ranging anywhere from 60 – 85 percent cacao, but for working purposes she stays in the 60-70 percent cacao range. These numbers refer to the total percentage of ingredients by weight that come from the cacao bean, including the chocolate liquor and cacao butter. In general, the higher the percentage, the darker and more flavorful the chocolate. "The taste I'm looking to create in my confections, which is a complementary balance between the chocolate and the added ingredients, best works in this percentage range." In addition to being nuanced and delicious, dark chocolate also boasts health benefits that overly sweetened, mass-produced milk chocolate does not possess.

Craig is a pioneer in hosting beer and chocolate pairings, teaming up with other businesses in Austin to offer guided and self-guided pairings. "I feel most people still think of chocolate and wine pairings as the norm, often imagining beer and chocolate as an odd coupling," says Craig. "When I started my chocolate career I had no idea that I would end up working so much with beer, but now I even collaborate on a seasonal chocolate stout with Austin Beerworks. I truly enjoy pairing chocolate with all types of beer, but if you were going to try your own pairing at home I would recommend beer that already promotes flavors you naturally think of as going well with chocolate. These include coffee, smoke, toasted nuts, malt, etc., that can be found in many stouts, porters, doppelbocks or brown ales."

Later this spring Craig and her husband, Chef Ian Thurwachter, will open Interio, an Italian restaurant in East Austin.



The front area will act as a retail space for Crave chocolates with a prominent chocolate counter and coffee service, offering staple and seasonal truffles, barks and sipping chocolates. They plan to continue hosting and expanding their beer and chocolate pairing events at the new space.

Another pillar in the Austin chocolate scene, Chocolaterie Tessa specializes in handmade, European-style confections including truffles, molded chocolates and an award-winning salted butter caramel. Owner Tessa Halstead, who opened her family-run business in 2012, hails from a family of chocolate makers with a 30-year history in Texas and is making waves with an interesting single-origin collection made from cacao beans grown exclusively in a specific region. Like wine, chocolate has a terroir, producing a wide variety of flavors that vary depending on the climate, soil and topography of its region of origin. "Purchasing bean-to-bar, or "craft" chocolate, is a way to support smaller producers who have a more direct connection to the farmers of cacao," says Halstead. "The chocolate makers that I work with are extremely

passionate about perfecting their craft and they are also intentional about how their decisions affect the entire chocolate supply chain. One of my producers travels to each of his origin countries to inspect the cacao during harvest. He knows the farmers by name and works hand-in-hand with them to ensure the highest quality every step of the way."

Aside from ethics, the flavors of craft chocolate can be far superior. While larger chocolate producers tend to sell overly sweet chocolates with mass appeal, craft chocolate makers highlight chocolate's natural nuanced flavors. "Our collection is designed so that each piece tastes quite differently from the next. We want the taster to have a unique experience with each bite," says Halstead. The collection comes with tasting notes designed to guide you through the flavors you may experience, and is an outstanding way to sample some of the world's best chocolates in their purest form. ♦

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