

For all the chocoholics out there

Written by By CINDY WELCH, Food Columnist
Tuesday, 03 February 2009 13:11



A new movie, "Confessions of a Shopaholic," hit the big screen last week. Its release made me wonder what would happen if Hollywood came up with a movie called "Confessions of a Chocoholic." I think everyone would hit the snack bar during the movie - or leave the theater hungry.

Several readers have asked why I haven't done a column on chocolate since they know I am a bona-fide chocoholic myself.

With so much to say about chocolate, I didn't know where to begin. But since Valentine's Day just around the corner, I decided to just dive in and start with a little history.

The Olmec, Mayan and Aztec cultures drank chocolate as a cold beverage, consisting of ground cacao beans and spices like chiles and cumin.

The Spanish conquistadors adopted it and brought it home with them to Europe where it grew in popularity. As its fame spread in England and France, milk and sugar were added, the chile removed and the beverage was served warm. At one point, it was even banned from public consumption because it was believed to be a narcotic.

Edible chocolate came about when cocoa producers discovered that "cocoa-butter waste," the bi-product left over after the cocoa liquor was withdrawn from the beans, could be used as a tasty treat.

The first chocolate bars were grainy in texture until the invention of "conching" in 1879 by a Swiss chocolatier. Conching is the process of mixing cocoa butter back with the pressed cocoa powder and stirring it with large rollers to produce a silky smooth consistency. After the invention of conching and the mechanization of production, the consumption of chocolate has increased at a rapid pace over the last 100 years.

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The United States and Britain lead the pack in the number of pounds consumed per person each year, with an estimated average of 12 to 15 pounds per person, not including baked goods. We are only bested by Switzerland, confection's top producer, whose population seems to eat as much chocolate as they export.

America and England are followed closely by European countries which prefer their chocolate less sweet and more bitter than the British and Americans. Citizens of South America and the Caribbean still favor chocolate more as a spice or flavoring than a confection. It is used in dishes such as mole and often contains cinnamon or chiles.

Asia, Africa and the Middle East have not really joined the ranks of choco-nations. Their sweets tend to be more herbal and sugar-based, and as baffling as it seems to most chocolate lovers, chocolate intake is limited to less than one-half pound per person each year on average.

Why are we so enamored with chocolate? You don't hear words such as gummy-worm-aholics or jelly-bean-aholics bantered about. What is the pull that draws such complete devotion? Why has chocolate been touted as everything from an aphrodisiac to a cure for everything imaginable?

Chocolate contains over 380 known chemicals. Researchers believe eating chocolate releases the production of natural opiates (which dull pain and increase a feeling of well-being), anandamide levels (which causes us to feel better) and phenylethylamine (a chemical related to amphetamines). It also contains caffeine-related substances that increase energy and alertness. No need to worry about over-dosing though. You would have to eat 25 pounds of chocolate at once to equal smoking marijuana or taking amphetamines. Just don't feed chocolate to your dogs. They don't have the enzymes in their systems to handle these stimulants.

On the emotional side, chocolate has come to symbolize love in our culture. It is thought of as a romantic gift. For women, especially, it's associated with love and romance. This could be part of the reason why 99 percent of women adore chocolate, as it makes them feel loved and special.

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The mouth-feel of chocolate is also unique. Cocoa butter melts at 95 degrees, just below body temperature. The more cocoa butter a chocolate has, the better the sensation. The smell of chocolate can trigger cravings like those only rivaled by the smell of fresh baked bread or fresh popped popcorn. It lends itself to stirring up food memories and good feelings from past indulgences.

With Valentine's Day looming on the horizon, how do you choose the best chocolate for your sweetheart?

Personal preference definitely matters. Is your chocoholic a purest who favors chocolates with a high cocoa butter content and less sugar? If so, dark chocolate is the way to go. Do they have fond memories of Hershey Bars, Reeses Peanut Butter Cups and milk chocolate covered cherries and caramels in heart-shaped boxes? They will favor milk or semi-sweet chocolate.

The taste of chocolate varies so much from brand to brand because of the types of beans that are used. Just like grapes for wine and beans for coffee, the flavor of cocoa beans is influenced by the region where they are grown. Words such as fruity, smoky, woody and floral are used to describe them, just as you would describe a fine wine or expensive cup of coffee.

Crillos beans from Venezuela are the strongest in flavor and the most expensive. They are believed to be the descendants of the beans used by the ancient cultures of Mexico and South America. Although Venezuela used to have the highest export of cocoa beans in the past, they are now eclipsed by the Forastero bean grown in Brazil and Africa. It makes up ninety percent of the annual crop and has a coarser, less complex flavor. It is used in most of the popular brands of chocolate.

Trinitario beans from Sri Lanka and Indonesia are the rarest and a hybrid of Crillos and Forastero. They were created when a storm wiped out the Crillos crop and the Forastero was brought in to combine with the Crillos beans that were left. They are very costly and usually used by most companies in combination with the other beans.

Although Crillos and Trinitario beans make up only ten percent of the cocoa bean crop, they are the best tasting and the most expensive. Cocoa beans are mixed and roasted at various rates just like coffee beans to create unique flavors for candy companies. These blends are highly

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prized and the recipes are kept secret by their creators. They usually have cocoa butter ratios above 65 percent and range from semi-sweet to bitter.

Inexpensive chocolates also include stabilizers and flavor additions such as milk, sugar and vanilla. They often include less than 25 percent cocoa butter with coconut butter being the replacement.

Next week I'll share with you some great places in the area to pick up that special chocolate Valentine. Don't wait until the last minute. The best will go fast.

Note from last week: □ **The Carrot Raisin Slaw requires two tablespoons of mayonnaise to complete the recipe.**

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For the past 20 years, Cindy Welch has been involved with all aspects of cooking, including formal culinary training, experience as food service director for First Baptist Church of Euless, a personal chef and owner of Cindy's Casa Cuisine. Cindy's favorite hobby is "providing delicious food for the people of Sulphur Springs." Her columns cover all aspects of the cooking experience.