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## Chocolate nouveau

Pioneering chocolatiers bring a new caliber of confections to Bay Area

By Catherine Nash, CONTRIBUTOR

THE BAY AREA has always been ground zero for chocolate making. Companies such as Ghirardelli and E. Guittard make their home here. In 1996, Scharffen Berger ushered in the next generation of chocolate making, roasting their own beans in small batches and popularizing bittersweet chocolate. (The Hershey Co. acquired the company last summer.)

From exploring unique flavor combinations to a focus on premium ingredients, a handful of East Bay chocolate experts are bringing a new kind of chocolate experience to the Bay Area

### Chuck and the Chocolate Factory

In Emeryville, Chuck Siegel stashes a sleeping bag in his 4,000-square foot kitchen for the occasional all-nighter spent making chocolate. In one corner, metal vats keep up to 400 pounds of melted chocolate ready for use in handmade truffles, confections and chocolate bars. Each week, Siegel and his five full-time employees use more than 1,000 pounds of couverture, the term for professional-grade chocolate.

Siegel is a perfectionist. His aim is no less than "to produce the world's finest chocolates." The house chocolate, a 65 percent bittersweet, is made by blending couverture from several chocolate manufacturers. But he dismisses the current obsession with chocolate percentages as marketing hype.

"Most people don't know what it means, much less how it impacts taste," he says. "My 65 percent bittersweet chocolate has more chocolate liquor in it than most people's 70 percent." The percentage reflects how much of the chocolate comes from the cacao bean, but the ratio of chocolate liquor to cocoa butter differs with each maker.

Siegel insists on organic, local ingredients. "We want [the customer— to feel like they're eating a mint plant," he says about the mint truffle, made with fresh spearmint from Jacobs Farm in nearby Pescadero and organic cream from Straus Family Dairy in Marin County. Charles Chocolates have no additives or preservatives, and are shipped within three days of being made.

Texture is also critical. "Chocolate is supposed to be smooth," he emphasizes. To make the mocha java bar, Siegel sifts out the fine powder from chopped coffee beans before combining the beans and chocolate. This prevents the chocolate from acquiring a grainy mouthfeel.

Best-sellers like the peanut butterfly (peanut praline enrobed in milk or dark chocolate) and the mojito heart (lime juice, spearmint and dark Jamaican rum) are sold in a dozen stores nationwide, including five in the Bay Area.

Siegel's favorite ingredient is caramel, and he produces five versions including the flagship fleur de sel. "All of us chocolatiers are selfish at heart," Siegel chuckles. "We make what we like."



Royal Treat: Candied ginger crowns a handmade truffle at Charles Chocolates in Emeryville. (D. Ross Cameron/staff)



Milk chocolate piping is squeezed onto truffles at Charles Chocolates in Emeryville. (D. Ross Cameron - Staff)

-Charles Chocolates, <http://www.charleschocolates.com>. Available at Bittersweet Chocolate Cafe, Cocoa Bella, Gumps and other area retailers.