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FOR THE LOVE OF CHOCOLATE

Once again, Bay Area artisans are at the forefront of a confectionary renaissance

Laura Compton, Chronicle Staff Writer

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It doesn't feature a crazed assembly line, or vats of chocolate, but make no mistake: The Charles Chocolates facility in Emeryville is a chocolate factory. Trays of gorgeous chocolates entice from a worktable – round lavender honey and Earl Grey truffles; rounded passion fruit and mojito hearts; orange twig truffles dusted with confectioners' sugar; and the piece de resistance, a dark chocolate box with a floral-printed white chocolate lid, filled with two kinds of caramels.

These decadent confections, from chocolatier Chuck Siegel, are typical of the offerings from the new wave of Bay Area artisan chocolatiers, who are making sophisticated products paired with eye-catching packaging.

A century after E. Guittard and Ghirardelli pioneered quality chocolate-making in San Francisco, with gold miners as their best customers, and a generation after Alice Medrich opened her Cocolat stores, and John Scharffenberger and Robert Steinberg started premium Scharffen Berger, these new chocolatiers are tapping into the region's passion for local, artisan products.



Rheena Sy uses a guitar cutter to make French butter truffle orange twigs – a twist on the traditional truffle – at premium chocolatier Chuck Siegel's Charles Chocolates facility in Emeryville. Chronicle photo by Kat Wade



Truffles from Charles Chocolates. Chronicle photo by Kat Wade

Like Michael Recchiuti, who introduced extravagantly flavored artisan truffles in 1996, they make their gourmet chocolates by hand, using natural or organic ingredients and premium chocolate. Yet, the resulting confections are all different from one another in ways that reflect the personalities and backgrounds of their creators.

"Certainly the Bay Area is very visionary when it comes to artisan chocolate," says Joan Steuer, who consults for big and small chocolate companies. "It paves the way for what's to come."

Changing tastes

Americans spent \$15.8 billion on chocolate confections last year, according to the Department of Commerce, up 3 percent from the year before. But tastes have deepened. Dark chocolate sales have increased by at least 15 percent over the past three years, says Lynn Bragg, president of the Chocolate Manufacturers Association, a trade association whose members account for 90 percent of U.S. cocoa production.

Seduced by antioxidant claims and the explosion in offerings, more and more people are discovering premium chocolate, preferably with a high cacao percentage (see "The dark chocolate obsession," this page), and exploring its characteristics as they would a fine wine.

Within the dark chocolate category, trends such as sweet-salty and hot-spicy flavors and "single origin" cacao sources have taken hold, converting more connoisseurs every day.

The mass-market companies have taken notice: In the past six months, Dove, See's and Ghirardelli have all rolled out dark chocolate offerings, including Mars Inc., which is reintroducing its limited-edition dark M&Ms.

Hershey Co. thought tastes were changing enough to buy both truffle maker Joseph Schmidt and Scharffen Berger a year ago and start a new subsidiary, Artisan Confections Co. Hershey also has a new premium line called Cacao Reserve, and a single-origin line planned for December.

Everyday indulgence

"People are using chocolate in a different way. The price is less of a variable, and the quality is more important," Steuer says. She credits Starbucks with helping shift the perception of chocolate as a special occasion treat to an "experiential indulgence" of buying several truffles in the afternoon.

"We're spending \$5 for coffee, and \$5 for chocolate," she says.

It seems consumers will pay for quality. That's what premium chocolate offers, from the couverture, a French term that refers to chocolate that is at least 32 percent cocoa butter, to natural ingredients, and no shelf life-extending additives.

"We order one week, they make it that week, we get the delivery within 3 to 4 days -- people realize it's the freshest it can be," says Ron De Leon, head buyer at Bi-Rite, which stocks a wide range of items from small chocolate companies.

"The greatest thing about artisan products is the story behind them," he continues. The chocolatiers "are so passionate about what they do. Everything they say, they make you want to eat every one of their chocolates."

With nine candymakers on staff and part-time help as needed, Siegel has the largest operation of the emerging chocolatiers. He just lured his friend Glen Ishikata from Scharffen Berger to be Charles Chocolates' vice president of operations, managing production and distribution.



Chuck Siegel of Charles Chocolates. Chronicle photo by Craig Lee

Charles Chocolates is Siegel's second candy company. In 1987, the self-taught chocolatier, then 25, founded Attivo Confections, which sold s'mores kits, among other things. He learned by "trial and error," he says. "Back then there weren't the educational opportunities that exist today."

He sold Attivo in 1995, and worked at San Francisco financial services and technology companies but "always had my foot in the chocolate," he says, consulting formally and informally, and making chocolates for parties and events. His chocolate tempering machine lived in his kitchen until he started Charles Chocolates.

Back to the sweet life

Eventually, he realized that "as much fun as I had helping other people, I really missed making candy." He spent a few months developing a varied line of handmade artisanal products, got wife Shabana's seal of approval, and was up and running by Oct. 1, 2004.

Charles Chocolate's distinctive packaging juxtaposes a loopy cursive logo and lines against primary colors and a brown background.

Siegel believes this chocolate fever started with the availability of high-end chocolate. "I truly think one of the most influential things was Trader Joe's carrying Valrhona," he says of the French brand.

"Valrhona is arguably one of the best chocolate bars in the world, and hundreds of thousands of people have had it. Like any specialty food product, once you've had really good chocolate, you really appreciate the difference, and you don't like going back." Buying a premium chocolate bar is "not considered just an indulgence anymore, it's considered a chocolate bar choice," he says.

"Right now, I think we're really at the beginning of a great chocolate renaissance in the Bay Area."

Consultant Steuer agrees. "Love and obsession with chocolate is not a fad. It's a trend that's here to stay."

The dark chocolate obsession

No chocolatier worth his or her couverture wants to discourage customers from eating chocolate. But there is one thing that puzzles them.

Why the obsession with percentages?

"This 72 percent, 80 percent chocolate thing to me is such a crock," Chuck Siegel says.

"Every chocolate is different, and has wildly different ratios of cocoa butter to chocolate liquor." For instance, "Our 65 percent bittersweet chocolate has more chocolate liquor than most 72 percents."

Cacao is simply the amount of cacao beans and cocoa butter by weight; the remainder refers to sugar and vanilla. But hype about the antioxidant properties of dark chocolate has taken hold in the public consciousness. Inevitably, perhaps, consumers think the darker the chocolate, the healthier it must be.

-- Laura Compton

Charles Chocolates.



A chocolate box filled with chocolate from Charles Chocolates. Chronicle photo by Craig Lee

Known for: Wide range of confections, including five bars, truffles and chocolate-covered almonds and hazelnuts, and citrus marzipan. Uses El Rey, E. Guittard and Cacao Barry chocolate.

We recommend: French butter twig truffles, truffles, triple-coated chocolate almonds, caramels.

Available at: More than 300 stores, including Whole Foods, Bi-Rite, Gump's and Confetti le Chocolatier. Also online through www.charleschocolates.com (Bay Area residents get free shipping).

The latest: Triple-Coated Chocolate Hazelnuts.

Where to get a fix

Here are some of the places carrying the artisan chocolates mentioned:

Bi-Rite. 3639 18th St. (near Guerrero), S.F.; (415) 241-9760.

Bittersweet. 2123 Fillmore St. (at Sacramento), S.F.; (415) 346-8715. Also in Oakland at 5427 College Ave. (at Hudson); (510) 654-7159.

Chocolate Covered. 3977 24th St. (at Noe), S.F.; (415) 641-8123.

CocoaBella Chocolates. 2102 Union St. (at Webster), S.F.; (415) 931-6213.

Sigona's Farmers Market. Stanford Shopping Center, 180 El Camino (off Sand Hill Road), Palo Alto; (650) 329-1340. Also at 2345 Middlefield Road (near Woodside Road), Redwood City; (650) 368-6993.

Whole Foods. Various Bay Area locations.

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