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WHAT'S NEW

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SWEET BEAT / Chocolate for locals



A new line of confections and chocolate bars from Charles Chocolates in San Francisco are handmade with premium ingredients like organic cream and fresh herbs, and are perishable enough that they are made to order no more than three days before they arrive in stores.

Owner Chuck Siegel says interest in domestic super-premium chocolate started in the late '80s with local companies like Alice Medrich's Cocolat and Joseph Schmidt, and later his own Attivo Confections, which he sold in 1995.

"European chocolate, no matter how good, is not going to compare to local," he says. "Chocolate doesn't age well."

The Food staff tried an assortment of Siegel's bitesize confections and enjoyed the bold fruit and herb flavorings. Our favorite chocolate bar is the Mocha Java, with coffee bean chunks. Triple-Chocolate Almonds are cushioned in a milk- and bittersweet-chocolate coating.

Charles Chocolates come in various sizes; 1/2 pound box assorted confections is \$24; 6-ounce tin of almonds is \$10; 3.4 ounce bar is \$4.50. Retailers include Bi-Rite Market and CocoaBella, San Francisco; Dean & DeLuca, St. Helena; Sweet Things, Tiburon; Bittersweet, Oakland; and all Draeger's Markets on the Peninsula. Orders can be sent by fax, (415) 242-2404; or by e-mailing chuck@charleschocolates.com.

-- Tara Duggan