

Raising the Bar

British consumers are far more interested in the quality and provenance of the food they eat these days, and chocolate is no exception. It's good news then that chefs are seeking out higher quality chocolate and experimenting with varying types from different parts of the world, as Fiona Griffiths investigates...

There was a time when deciding what chocolate to buy was a straight choice between a Cadbury's Dairy Milk, a bar of Bournville or a Nestlé Milkybar, but today it's a rather different story.

Now there are so many chocolate companies – large and small – making chocolate with varying amounts of cocoa and from different types of beans grown in diverse locations across the southern hemisphere, that the subject of chocolate has taken on a whole new complexity.

Kent-based Damian Allsop, who worked as a pastry chef in a string of top restaurants before setting up in business as a chocolatier, believes chocolate is going through a renaissance similar to that of wine.

"Twenty-five years ago in the UK the

only wines most people knew were Blue Nun and Chianti. Then we started travelling and becoming more educated, and we began to understand about grape varieties and gradually our palette changed," he says.

"The same thing is happening with chocolate – our awareness and our understanding of quality is changing.

"We're starting to discover that with different varieties of cocoa bean you get different characters in the chocolate, and that a particular type of bean grown in Venezuela will taste very different to the same bean grown in Peru."

And this wide range in flavour profiles is something many chefs have been exploring as a way of adding an extra dimension to their desserts and petits fours.

New chocs on the block

Lisa Allen, head chef at Northcote near Blackburn, Lancashire, was using 70 per cent cocoa chocolate made from a blend of beans by the French company Valrhona. But now she's discovered a new Swiss chocolate company called Original Beans, and has been trialling their 75 per cent cocoa organic chocolate made solely from limited-yield Porcelana beans grown in the Peruvian Andes.

"The Original Beans chocolate is incredibly fruity, with a real berry hint coming through. It's quite different to the chocolate I've been using from Valrhona, so I've had to think hard about the best medium for it," says Allen.

"A few years ago it was a case of one chocolate goes for all, but nowadays

A cocoa pod on the tree



we've got the privilege of so many varieties to choose from and you can really focus on what chocolate is best for what, whether it's tempering it and using it as a shell, or using it for a *delice*, a *mousse* or a *sorbet*."

Russell Plowman, head chef at Gilpin Hotel in Windermere, Cumbria, previously used Valrhona but after testing out several alternatives, he's switched to another high-end French chocolate supplier, Michel Cluizel.

"I started shopping around this year and there was a real variation in flavour between all the different chocolates I tried," says Ploughman.

"I settled on Michel Cluizel because in taste tests their 72 per cent cocoa chocolate was the best. It works really well with my recipes – it has a nice bitterness to it but it's not overly bitter, so we don't have to add too much to it, just marry it up with some nice complementary flavours."

Top: Lisa Allen, head chef (and chief chocolate taster), Northcote, Blackburn

Middle: Lisa's dark Valrhona chocolate cylinder, smoked nuts and salted organic sheep's milk ice cream

Above: Russell Plowman's dark chocolate fondant with pistachio ice cream

“A chocolate that's labelled '70 per cent cocoa' doesn't tell you about the quality, it just tells you what's in it.”

Doing the maths

While the percentage of cocoa in chocolate has a big part to play when it comes to taste, it isn't necessarily a case of the higher the cocoa content, the better the chocolate.

The way the beans have been dried, fermented and then processed at the chocolate factory are other major factors in determining quality.

As William Curley – another pastry chef turned chocolatier (based in Richmond, Surrey) – puts it: “Somehow the media has picked up on 70 per cent cocoa being the ultimate chocolate, but that 70 per cent cocoa chocolate could be made by a big commercial manufacturer from *forastero* beans [the most widely grown variety], or made by Amedei [a small Italian company] with *porcelana* beans [a strain of the scarce *criollo* bean], and they'd be at completely opposite ends of the spectrum.”

Fellow chocolatier Damian Allsop agrees.

“A chocolate that's labelled '70 per cent cocoa' doesn't tell you about the quality, it just tells you what's in it. It would be like going into a shop and saying ‘have you got a 14 per cent alcohol bottle of wine?’”

Pure flavour

Allsop makes his filled chocolates by hand using chocolate containing varying amounts of cocoa (including some 100 per cent cocoa) from Valrhona. He's also experimenting with chocolates from other producers, including US-based Amano, English company Duffy, and Original Beans.

Instead of putting the traditional cream or butter in the ganache (the filling), he does something revolutionary – he uses water, giving a cleaner, lighter taste that enables the pure flavour of the chocolate to shine through.



Damian Allsop's Chef's Chocolates

HOW TO RECOGNISE – AND TASTE – GOOD CHOCOLATE

The Academy of Chocolate (academyofchocolate.org.uk), which was set up in 2005 with the aim of raising awareness of good quality chocolate, says chocolate should have a minimum cocoa content of 60 per cent for dark and 30 per cent for milk. It shouldn't contain anything you don't recognise – so if you see an E-number, artificial preservatives or hydrogenated fats in the ingredients list, then steer clear.

Appearance Chocolate should be flawless, evenly coloured and a deep shade of mahogany or red. Black is not necessarily an indicator of a good chocolate – it tends to indicate that the beans have been over-roasted. There should be no cracks or air pockets, streaks or sugar bloom.

Aroma The chocolate should smell good as you unwrap it with a complex fragrance. It should be sweetly fragrant but not overpowering, with notes of vanilla, berry, caramel, roasted nuts, etc. It is bad to have no smell at all – if you can't smell, you can't taste. Burnt, musty, chemically or medicinal is not good.

Touch It should feel silky, not sticky, and should just begin to yield to the warmth of your finger.

Sound Take a piece and break it – it should snap cleanly. If it splinters or crumbles, that's not good.

Mouthfeel Most taste buds are on the front of the tongue which is where you should start tasting the chocolate. If it doesn't start to melt straight away this is probably a sign of poor quality. The texture should be smooth and buttery, gently dissolving into a creamy liquid filling the mouth with its complexity of flavours. It must not be grainy or gluey. If it's waxy or clacky it sometimes means the cocoa butter has been replaced with vegetable fat and it is not real chocolate.

Flavour Essentially, chocolate is bittersweet, fruity and spicy with a good balance of acidity, and should be subtle rather than overpowering.

Aftertaste You want the flavour to linger for several minutes (good chocolate can linger for up to 45 minutes) with a clean aftertaste and no residue. It certainly shouldn't be overpoweringly sweet.

Allsop explains: "Every chocolate has its own individual character and I want to look after that character as I put it through the process of moulding it and texturing it. So I use water to unlock the true character of the chocolate rather than masking it with cream or butter.

"The flavour delivery and the cleanliness in the mouth when you use water is remarkable. When I worked out the water ganache [a process that took nearly two years to perfect] I realised we had something completely unique."

And it's that uniqueness that has led to his product becoming a favourite amongst some of Britain's top chefs.

Instead of making their own chocolates to serve with coffee at the end of a meal, chefs like Claude Bosi at Hibiscus and the Sanchez-Iglesias brothers at Casamia, turn to Allsop, who keeps them supplied with a range of chocolates of their choice.

Some chefs, like Adam Simmonds at Danesfield House in Marlow, and Angela Hartnett at Murano in London, will ask Allsop to make chocolates with a specific – often slightly obscure – flavour.

For instance, Allsop has developed a 'mango and curry' chocolate – a milk chocolate shell with a ganache flavoured with mango purée and curry oil – for Adam Simmonds (which works incredibly well), while for Angela Hartnett's Italian menu he's provided chocolates flavoured with blood orange, basil, lemon and balsamic, and anise and coffee.

"Whether we're working with a chef on specific flavours or they're leaving it to us, we're very careful to make sure each client has their own set of chocolates. So if we're doing a salty liquorice for Claude Bosi, no one else in the London area will have that," says Allsop.

"It's a great way of working because we're always experimenting with different

flavours for our chef clients, so it keeps it creative and exciting."

After dinner treats

Tom Kerridge at the Hand & Flowers in Marlow doesn't go for wacky flavours but takes Allsop's salted muscovado caramels, which are served with coffee after dinner.

"They're quite dark and rich and the customers love them. I like to stick with those because they're quite classic, which ties in with the fact that we're a pub and most of my food is French based," says Kerridge.

"In the past few years we've started looking for the best quality that we can in everything, and that includes chocolate.

"We use a blend of 100 per cent cacao chocolate from [Devon based] Willie Harcourt-Cooze, and a 70 per cent cocoa chocolate from Valrhona in our desserts, which gives a great flavour profile."

He adds: "At the end of the day, if our customers are drinking fantastic dessert wines, they don't want to drink them with a chocolate dessert made from Cadbury's Dairy Milk."

Stephen Terry, chef-patron at The Hardwick in Abergavenny, also prefers to utilise Allsop's expertise rather than making chocolates in-house.

"We could make our own but I don't think we could make them as good as Damian – it's a very technical thing and you've got to have a temperature-controlled environment to get the consistency," says Terry.

“At the end of the day, if our customers are drinking fantastic dessert wines, they don't want to drink them with a chocolate dessert made from Cadbury's Dairy Milk.”

"I just say to him 'send me what you've got' and he'll look at what we had previously and send me what he thinks is best.

"We've had his Douglas fir chocolate, which is very interesting because it smells almost like pine, and his basil and all the citrus fruits, but my favourite is probably the salted caramel – it's a winner every time."

Chocolate and chilli

One chef who does make all his own chocolates is Nigel Tabb at Tabb's Restaurant in Truro, Cornwall.

A self-confessed "chocaholic", he also uses chocolate in some savoury dishes such as venison and pigeon.

"It also works well with chilli and vegetables. Once you put it in you don't

necessarily taste the chocolate, but the whole dish gets a richer, deeper flavour," he says.

Tabb has been doing regular chocolate tastings in the restaurant over the past 10 years, and has noticed that his customers' awareness of what makes good chocolate is growing.

"It used to be that people in this country would accept a lot lower quality chocolate than they do abroad, but our palate for chocolate is changing and more and more people will recognise good chocolate from bad," says Tabb.

"The great thing about higher quality chocolate is that a little bit goes a long way – unlike something like a Mars Bar, you can't actually eat that much of it in one go because the flavour is so rich and intense."

IS CHOCOLATE GOOD FOR YOU?

Well, when it comes to good quality, high-cocoa, low-sugar chocolate, the answer is 'yes'! These are the reasons why...

- Cocoa beans contain naturally occurring chemicals like theobromine and phenylethylamine which the brain produces when we get excited by being in love.
- Real chocolate has been noted to contribute to the prevention of cardiovascular disorders. Chocolate contains cocoa butter which, like olive oil, reduces cholesterol.
- Real chocolate is high in a number of vitamins and minerals such as fluoride, which can be good for your teeth, and potassium which, in balanced quantities, helps muscles and nerves function correctly, especially the heart.
- According to research at the University of California Davis, flavonoids reduce the chances of high blood pressure and deep vein thrombosis. A 50g bar of chocolate contains the same concentration of flavonoids as two glasses of red wine or six apples.