



Italian Women

Know Food and Wine

February 2012
Valentine's Day Edition

I love you more than chocolate!

Valentine's Day is just around the corner and I don't know of anything more appropriate than chocolate to celebrate the month of love. Today as in the past, when ancient civilizations were offering it to their Gods in religious ceremonies, chocolate is part of countless celebrations, including Valentine's Day.

Producing chocolate is not at all easy. Ripe pods are collected by hand from the Theobroma. This equatorial tree must be at least 5 years old to bear 30 usable fruit per year. Inside each fruit, there are roughly 40 cacao beans covered in a white pulp. After collecting, the beans are fermented for 3 to 9 days in a closed wooden container. During this time, natural enzymes in the beans convert the natural sugar in the pulp into alcohol and then into acids. Beans have now a brown color and the typical chocolate flavor. Beans are dried (by hot air or by sun), mixed with other beans and sold. Buyers will roast them in line with their necessity. After roasting, the beans are

cooled and the thin shells are removed to extract the beans, now called *nibs*. The nibs are ground down in *cocoa butter* and liquefied into *chocolate liquor*. *Chocolate liquor* is not at all liquor but simply a very bitter liquid of pure chocolate.

At this point, some batches of chocolate liquor are pressed to extract cocoa butter (the left over solid mass is pulverized into cocoa powder). Other batches are used directly to make chocolate.

Chocolate liquor is blended with cocoa butter, sugar, vanilla and powder milk in different percentage. This mixture is placed into giant rollers (*concher*) to produce an even flavor. The more the mix blends the smoother the chocolate will be. The final product is then placed in a heating and cooling machine to stabilize the cocoa butter crystals. The chocolate is passed through a pipe into a mold, refrigerated and packaged.

Recipes and percentages may vary by producers, but

in America to be considered chocolate, it must contain cocoa butter and cocoa liquor. It may also contain sugar (or natural sweetener), milk, cream, nuts, fruit and spices.

No matter what kind you like, chocolate is a treat you can't live without. *Dark chocolate* (with at least 70% cocoa); *milk chocolate* (with at least 50% cocoa and at least 12% milk and/or cream); or *white chocolate* (with only cocoa butter, sugar, milk and /or cream and vanilla) are good alone or paired with wine. My advice for this Valentine's Day is to set aside the usual Champagne and strawberries and try some chocolate pairings. Pair dark chocolate with *Tawny Port*, *Armagnac* or *Cognac*; and milk or white chocolate with *Muscat*, *Riesling* or *Sauternes*.

Considering that no other food has the capacity to stimulate happy hormones more than chocolate, I promise, you will have a very happy day, with your Valentine or by yourself.

Inside this issue:

- ≈ Chocolate production.
- ≈ Chocolate origins.
- ≈ Orietta's Tips.

Don't forget:

≈ Store chocolate for no more than 6 months in an airtight container and place it in a cool (65°) and dry (not more than 50% humidity) place.

≈ *Cacao* is the tree or unprocessed cacao beans; *Cocoa* is the processed beans turned into powder; and *Chocolate* is the processed beans in liquid or solid form.

≈ Always serve it or cut it at room temperature.



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Not all chocolate is born the same

Like wine and olive oil, chocolate flavors vary not only by producing technique (especially roasting) but also in relation to the beans selected. Soil and climate conditions strongly determine the beans profile. Beans from the Dominican Republic have deep and earthy flavor with tobacco notes, while those coming from Trinidad and Tobago are fruitier with spicy notes. Panama produces beans with classic aromas and flavors and strong notes of nut. Venezuelan beans are known to have deep notes of cherries, while Peruvian and Colombian to be bitter and fruity. Ecuador and Costa Rica produce beans with fruity and floral notes, Jamaica with tropical notes, while Mexico and Indonesia beans have more acidity. Today 70% of the world's supply of cocoa beans comes from West Africa, particularly the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria and Cameron, all producing beans with deep and persistent flavor.

The most common beans are Forastero (90% of the entire production). With good resistance, this bean delivers chocolate with low acidity. Crillo beans, grown mainly in Latin America, have lower resistance and are more inclined to diseases. They deliver a complex chocolate with fruity notes. Trinitario beans (named after the island of Trinidad), combines the best quality of the two. They deliver persistent flavors, high acidity with notes of spices and fruit.

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Orietta's Tips.

Chocolate tasting is one of the best activities I can imagine. Tasting by percentage, by origin, by producer, you name it I've done it. Here are some guidelines for YOUR chocolate tasting:

A. Preparation: Take the chocolate out of the storage at least 10 minutes before tasting. Remove it from the original packaging, but keep the wrapping to have basic information available. Place the different bars on a wooden board without touching one another. Don't select more than 5/6 samples (overwhelming your

senses is a real danger). Start with the milder (milk chocolate or lowest percentage of cocoa) to be able to move your way up.

B. Tasting: First look and determine the color to evaluate freshness (no dust or ashy white). To warm the chocolate, rub it between your index and thumb and smell it. Try to associate aromas and memories. Chocolate can have up to 60 different aromas: mild or strong; roasted or fruity; species or floral; tobacco, vanilla and nuts. Last, place the chocolate in your mouth, let it melt for few seconds to

release the primary notes. Then, chew it few times to increase the surface area of your mouth in contact with the sample and release secondary aromas. Finally, push the chocolate to the roof of the mouth and let it melt completely. In this process take notes of the flavors or aromas. Bouquet can go from light citrus notes to persistent acidity. From deep earthy flavor to tobacco. From tropical fruit to spices and nut.

Remember to cleanse your mouth with water (served at room temperature) between samples.