

death by chocolate

Sink your teeth into our guide to attaining chocolate nirvana

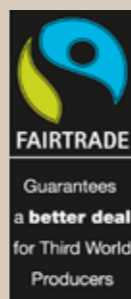
WORDS VANESSA KEYS
STYLING LESIELE HAILAME PHOTOGRAPHY CRAIG WALL

It's hard to resist the rich, heady smell of cocoa and the immeasurable pleasure of unwrapping a milky chocolate square. Even the earliest chocolate lovers, the Mayans and the Aztecs, declared the bitter beans that spilled from the cacao trees a 'gift from the heavens'. These days, a new breed of chocolatiers is pushing the boundaries when it comes to composing exotic flavour combinations, choosing sustainably farmed beans and favouring locally grown produce. Much like wine and coffee, chocolate is to be savoured and appreciated – so before you bite into your next block, read our experts' words of wisdom and delight in our top chocolate finds. >



eating ethically

Chocolate might be sweet but there is a sour side to our favourite confectionery. Roughly two-thirds of the world's cocoa is grown and produced in Western Africa, where some plantation workers, often young children, toil under harsh labour conditions for minimum wage. Thankfully, an increasing number of chocolate manufacturers are recognising the importance of meeting international Fairtrade standards, a scheme which ensures that workers are paid a fair wage and have decent working conditions. It's also a better eco choice; to be awarded Fairtrade status, companies must adhere to sustainable production methods. By choosing chocolate that carries the Fairtrade label, you're allowing farmers and their communities to receive a secure income, as well as playing an important role in improving third world conditions.



bean around the block

Far too bitter to be eaten neat, the cacao bean's journey to become chocolate is a long one, beginning with its harvest by plantation workers in countries such as Ghana, Ivory Coast and Indonesia. Once the best quality beans are selected, they're roasted and cracked open to extract the nibs, tiny pods which are ground down to create a liquid mass called cocoa liquor (no relation to alcohol). Depending on the type of chocolate being made, cocoa butter, sugar and milk are added and rolled into a fine paste. The paste is run through a conching machine, for hours or even days, to extract its superior flavours. It's stored until it's ready to be transformed into everything from bars and blocks to decadent truffles and scrumptious tarts.

yes, chocolate is good for you

Dark chocolate (with at least 35 per cent cocoa solids) is the healthy choice. Not only does the high content of cocoa contain large amounts of cocoa phenols, shown to lower blood pressure, but the omission of milk means that the anti-oxidant count is much higher. Milk can interfere with the absorption of anti-oxidants that occur naturally in cacao beans, so even pairing your dark chocolate with a glass of milk is a no-no. The low sugar content, compared to milk chocolate, means that your calorie intake is lower, too.

tasting notes

The cocoa cops have arrived and they've got a message for all of you chocolate chompers: slow down! "As with a fine wine, you should use all five senses to truly appreciate the complexity of flavours," says Thomas Schnetzler, Lindt's master chocolatier. Apart from the obvious indicator, taste, there are a number of other things to look out for. "The shine and finish of the chocolate is a sure sign of the snap and the texture to follow," says Kim Linssen, chocolatier at Koko Black. "Take small bites and let the chocolate melt in your mouth – this helps the flavour develop on your palate and last longer. Poor quality chocolate will feel flat, or, even worse, leave a grainy film on the throat. That's a sure sign that sugar, rather than quality cocoa beans, is the main ingredient."



sweet success

If you've ever attempted to melt chocolate and ended up with a lumpy mess, don't despair – co-owner and chef extraordinaire of Aria Restaurant, Matt Moran, shares his secrets...

What's the best chocolate to use?

"Couverture has a higher cocoa content and is better suited to mousses, ice-creams and tempering

chocolate. Cooking chocolate is better for baking cakes as it has a lower cocoa content and the added stabiliser makes it easier to handle. At Aria, we use Valrhona chocolate; nothing compares in terms of flavour and texture." Find Valrhona 'Le Noir' Gastronomie 61 per cent chocolate at Simon Johnson for \$63.75/1 kg;

for stockists, visit simonjohnson.com.au.

Your foolproof method for melting chocolate? "The best way to melt chocolate is to start it 10 minutes before you need it. Boil a saucepan of water and, once boiling, take it off the heat. Place a bowl of chocolate on top and leave it to slowly melt – the chocolate will melt evenly and won't burn or go grainy."

DARK

Lindt 'Excellence' 70% Cocoa (\$3.59/100g)

An intense bittersweet blend of delicate nutty fragrances and rich cocoa notes.

Benefits: The high cocoa content means this full-bodied chocolate is brimming with anti-oxidants and mood-elevating chemicals.

Devour slowly. Let it melt on your tongue and distribute evenly across your tastebuds.

Pair with a full-flavoured, fruity cabernet or serve melted on strawberries.

Stockists: widely available at leading retailers; lindt.com.au.



Loving Earth 'Raw Organic' 72% Cocoa (\$9.90/100g)

Strong bitter notes have been delicately balanced with organic raw agave syrup to produce an intense yet sweet flavour.

Benefits: Raw cocoa beans in their purest state double the anti-oxidant count, while the absence of dairy is perfect for vegans. **Devour** one mouthful at a time; this is a chocolate to savour. **Pair** with a pot of organic tea. **Stockists:** (03) 9095 6250, raw-chocolate.net.



Seatonfire Wild Chilli 59% Cocoa (from \$15/100g)

A fiery blend of creamy Belgian chocolate and Queensland-grown 'Red Devil' chilli.

Benefits: The chilli's fire comes from a high concentration of capsaicin, an excellent source of Vitamin A and beta-carotene, which has been shown to clear congestion and offer pain relief.

Devour at your own risk. This is a seriously spicy sensation not for the faint-hearted. **Pair** with a lovely pinot noir. **Stockists:** Seatonfire, (07) 4630 5719, seatonfire.com.



ORGANIC/FAIRTRADE

Green & Black's 'Maya Gold' (\$3.99/100g)

Intoxically aromatic, this exotic dark blend marries Mayan cocoa beans with a twist of zesty orange and spicy notes of cinnamon and nutmeg.

Benefits: The first product to be awarded the coveted Fairtrade mark, this choccy wins points for its organic ingredients and high cocoa content. **Devour** with a lover by your side – the spices will warm your soul. **Pair** with a Spanish-style mulled wine.

Stockists: 1800 424 880, greenandblacks.com.au.



Alter Eco 'Dark Cacao' (\$6.50/100g)

Distinct earthy aromas take this dark chocolate to a whole other level.

Benefits: Chocolate and a clear conscience go hand-in-hand, thanks to this Fairtrade company, which farms its beans using methods that support small-scale farmers. **Devour** leisurely; this rich beauty deserves your full attention.

Pair with a red wine or add to a sauce. **Stockists:** (02) 9340 1080, alterecopacific.com.



Cocolo 'Premium Organic' Milk (\$5.50/100g)

Divinely silky, the mild nutty aroma is thanks to a delicate blend of roasted cocoa beans and vanilla.

Benefits: Using organic ingredients and awarded the Fairtrade status, Cocolo have upped the health factor by using evaporated cane juice in place of sugar. **Devour** with a clear conscience – the product of farmers paid an honest wage tastes twice as sweet. **Pair** with organic tea. **Stockists:** Organic Trader, (02) 8399 0122, cocolo.com.au.



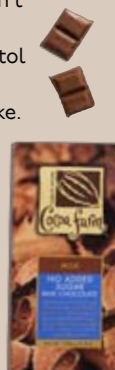
MILK

Cocoa Farm 'No Added Sugar' (\$5.95/100g)

Melt-in-your-mouth and oh-so-buttery, this creamy chocolate is made from wholesome ingredients that aren't genetically modified.

Benefits: Natural herbal sweetener Malititol replaces processed sugar, so it lowers your sugar and carb intake. Perfect for diabetics. **Devour** in moderation – this chocolate shows that Mother Nature really does provide. **Pair** with a freshly brewed cup of tea for a guilt-free afternoon snack.

Stockists: Farm by Nature, I300 262 621, farmbynature.com.au.



Koko Black 'Milk' (\$8.40/100g)

Velvety smooth with a high silken gloss, this sweet blend boasts delicate hints of caramel.

Benefits: Handcrafted in Australia, some ingredients have been sourced from local producers. **Devour** with hungry friends. One taste of this creamy concoction and you'll demolish the entire block (we speak from experience). **Pair** with a sweet, late-harvest Riesling or a cup of Earl Grey with lashings of milk and honey. **Stockists:** (03) 9354 0720, kokoblack.com.



Haigh's 'Milk Block' Chocolate (\$7.80/200g)

Seductively sweet and brimming with buttery caramel undertones, this blend has an extra-rich taste.

Benefits: Haigh's received a green tick from Greenpeace for their use of non-genetically modified ingredients. **Devour** when in dire need of a pick-me-up or when hormone levels are high – this will help, we promise. **Pair** with a cafe latte for the ultimate caffeine hit.

Stockists: 1800 819 757, haighschocolates.com.au.



let's talk types

Dark chocolate contains no milk and is distinctively more bitter than its milky counterpart. A high percentage of cocoa solids (35 per cent is the minimum but this can range up to 99 per cent) is blended with cocoa butter and sugar to produce a full-bodied, intense chocolate experience.

Milk chocolate remains a perennial favourite for decadent creaminess, sweet flavour and delicate hints of caramel. Cocoa butter and cocoa solids are mixed with a high percentage of milk and sugar to create a silky, melt-in-your-mouth texture.

White chocolate might be sweet and tempting but this creamy confectionery is technically not chocolate, due to the absence of cocoa mass.

Organic chocolate contains ingredients sourced and farmed using sustainable practices, without the addition of pesticides and chemicals.

Raw chocolate is uncooked, unprocessed chocolate that contains no sugar or dairy and is suitable for vegans. Because the cacao beans are not roasted, the plant phenols are in their most pure, natural state – giving you twice the amount of anti-oxidants than regular chocolate. **16**