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# Chocolate Isn't Cliché: 5 Cocoa Geek Brands to Try This Valentine's Day

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by CHANTAL MARTINEAU



Photo: Courtesy of Nathan Miller



You might think a box of chocolate for Valentine's Day is cliché, but it's no coincidence we associate the decadent treat with love. Eating chocolate promotes the release of endorphins and dopamine in the brain, leading to feelings of well-being and euphoria; it also releases a neurotransmitter called phenylethylamine, otherwise known as the "love drug" for its role in infatuation and arousal. And cocoa butter melts at the temperature of the human body, which is why you've probably found yourself licking it off your fingers . . . or someone else's.

What many of us don't think about when we think of chocolate is its ancient history as a sacred drink and nutritious food. We also don't think of it as the seed

of a fruit that grows on a tree, or consider that the tree's growing conditions have a tremendous effect on what ends up melting on your tongue. Chocolate, like wine, is a product of its terroir. The climate, soil, and altitude of where the beans have been grown all affect the final product. This is especially true of single-origin bean-to-bar chocolate. A Hershey's bar is made of chocolate from around the world, processed and flavored to consistently taste like a Hershey's bar. Single-origin chocolate is like wine: It should taste of its place and may vary from one batch to the next.

The greater the cocoa content and simpler the ingredients, the more likely you are to experience not only the chemical effects of chocolate but the flavors that result from its terroir. Bean-to-bar chocolate-makers source exceptional cacao beans directly from farmers and boldly showcase them. Some are taking the bean-to-bar movement to the next level, delving into the nature of cacao, ancient production methods, and ways to improve the lives of the people who grow it. Look to these chocolate-makers this Valentine's Day to enlighten the chocoholic in your life.



chocolate

Photo: Courtesy of Dandelion Chocolate



### **Dandelion Chocolate, San Francisco**

Co-owner Greg d'Alesandre's business card reads "chocolate sourcerer." It's a clever play on words for a man whose job involves traveling to the ends of the earth to source great cocoa. The cacao tree grows in lush, humid tropics, almost exclusively within 20 degrees of the equator. Each region—Belize, Guatemala, Madagascar, Tanzania (D'Alesandre is even looking to source from Fiji)—produces a distinct chocolate with its own subtle flavors. But it's about more than finding

great cocoa, he says. He's particularly drawn to farms that support the local community and environment. D'Alesandre has sourced beans from a cooperative in Liberia that rehabilitates ex-child soldiers through cacao farming, and from a bird sanctuary in the Dominican Republic where the Bicknell's thrush winters. Each of Dandelion's single-origin bars is unique to its terroir—the Dominican is nutty and bright, the Liberian earthy and umami-rich—and helps sustain the inhabitants (feathered and not) of the land.



chocolate

Photo: Courtesy of ChocoVivo



### **ChocoVivo, Los Angeles**

The history of chocolate is more than 3,000 years long. Before it was a sweet treat, it was a bitter drink enjoyed by the Mayans and Aztecs. Patricia Tsai turned to these ancient cultures for inspiration when starting her chocolate company. Inspired by pre-Columbian production methods, ChocoVivo uses stone grinding and forgoes conching and tempering, common processes that smooth and mellow out chocolate. The result is a bar with a coarse, rustic texture. All the cacao beans are sourced from an organic farm in Tabasco, in southeastern Mexico. Tsai hails her grower as the Yoda to her Jedi; he taught her to treat chocolate like food for the body and soul. Just in time for Valentine's Day, ChocoVivo is looking to expand chocolate's body benefits with a chocolate body oil. Made with coconut oil, cacao butter, and sea buckthorn oil, which is rich in nutrients and said to boost performance in the bedroom, it's technically edible, says Tsai: "In case you want to lick it off someone."



chocolate

Photo: Courtesy of Woodblock Chocolate Manufactory



### **Woodblock Chocolate Manufactory, Portland, Oregon**

Would you spend \$100 on a chocolate bar? Charley Wheelock thinks you should. He was working at a winery when he discovered the bean-to-bar movement. Intrigued by the agricultural aspect of chocolate and its parallels to wine, he started making chocolate with just two ingredients: cocoa and sugar. His search for the best beans took him to Trinidad, where he ended up collaborating with the Cocoa Research Centre, which is dedicated to cacao sustainability. The result is the Fundare bar, whose proceeds go toward the CRC. Unlike most plants, cacao seeds can't be dehydrated or frozen for posterity. They must be kept alive, planted in the earth. The CRC has the world's most comprehensive collection of cacao varieties, a diverse forest that acts as a living seed bank. The Fundare bar is made from many varieties on its plantation, and there are 2,400 varieties in total. "The nerd value for chocolate geeks is off the charts," says Wheelock.



chocolate

Photo: Courtesy of Raaka Chocolate



### **Raaka Chocolate, Brooklyn**

Chocolate is made from the seed of the pod-shaped cacao fruit. Each pod contains a few dozen seeds, which get fermented and dried, then roasted, winnowed, and ground before being made into chocolate. Roasting has long been used to even out flavor inconsistencies. Bean-to-bar producers tend to roast their chocolate at low temperatures to preserve the natural, subtle flavors of cacao. At Raaka, roasting is skipped altogether—a rare approach to chocolate-making. In this adventurous spirit, Raaka offers a chocolate subscription service called First Nibs. For \$25 per month, subscribers get two experimental chocolate bars, plus a third from the main collection, which includes Pink Sea Salt, Bourbon Cask Aged, and Smoked Chai. Gift your special someone a subscription for February for a floral-themed selection: a Lavender and Chamomile bar made from 70 percent Belize cacao, a Rose and Jasmine made from 70 percent Bolivian. Raaka spreads the love further by donating the cocoa husks to a local school gardening program for mulch.



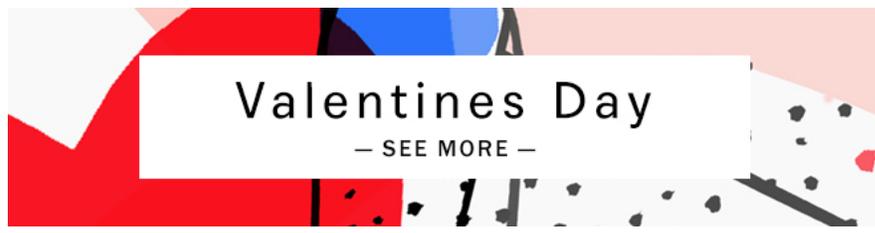
chocolate

Photo: Courtesy of Nathan Miller



### Nathan Miller Chocolate, Chambersburg, Pennsylvania

Nathan Miller's background is in the kitchen, which informs his approach to chocolate. While other bean-to-bar producers tend to highlight the distinct flavors of their chocolate by going as dark as possible, Miller has a soft spot for milk chocolate. He makes several bars with different types of milk, from rich whole milk to tangy buttermilk, all provided by small farms. "The farmer who gives us our milk, that's part of our terroir," he explains, adding that a single-origin chocolate might lend itself better to one type of milk or another. The latest addition to his eponymous line of chocolates is the Rum Raisin Milk Chocolate bar made in collaboration with nearby microdistillery Wigle Whiskey. Miller plans to go even lighter with a white chocolate bar, which is still in testing. Cocoa purists may bristle, but Miller insists milk and white chocolate can be just as refined as dark. "They pair nicely with high-acid white wines," he says.



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