

# BEAN THERE, DONE THAT

Chocolate lovers are smiling  
now that the cocoa bean is  
back in favour

BY CAROLYN COOPER



and not liking it because it tasted bitter, and a lot of it was bitter. Now, there are so many fabulous dark chocolates on the market. They're smooth, full of flavour and without a trace of bitterness." CocoMira's new Espresso Crunch is a coffee-flavoured caramel covered in roasted almonds, ground espresso and a blend of Belgian chocolate (half 54-per-cent dark chocolate and half milk chocolate).

Gary Mitchell, production supervisor at Vancouver-based Purdy's Chocolates Ltd., agrees that dark chocolate has captured the public's attention. "We have recently seen a spike in sales of our 70-per-cent cocoa bars, and sales of all our dark chocolate selections have dramatically increased," he says. Mitchell notes that in the company's 52 stores across Canada customers are also asking more questions about the connection between health and cocoa.

Most chocolate on the market comes from blended bean varieties. But, like the fas-

Isn't it funny that scientists are just now discovering what chocolate lovers have always known? That is, that cocoa is actually good for you.

But chocolate does more than elevate your mood. New research shows that cocoa is rich in antioxidants called flavanols – particularly in high-quality dark chocolate – which can help reduce the risk of heart disease. February's *Archives of Internal Medicine* also published a study showing that cocoa consumption lowers blood pressure and the risk of premature death in elderly men. In fact, studies by both chocolate manufacturers such as The Hershey Co. and Barry Callebaut, as well as independent researchers, attribute a whole host of health benefits to dark chocolate, including an anti-aging effect, a cardiovascular system boost, even cancer fighting qualities. Chocolate has also been proven to have anti-inflammatory and immune-enhancing properties.

Chocolate also neatly fits the bill for consumers torn between eating healthy, and giving into their cravings for mini-indulgences or rewards. But while cocoa is high on consumer wish lists, it's not the same old bean. Instead of picking up yesterday's mega-size chocolate bars, chocoholics are turning to smaller, top-quality cocoa. And for most people, a healthy yet delicious treat is worth the premium price tag. It's a trend both chocolatiers and mainstream food manufacturers are picking up on, as they offer a greater selection of specialty dark chocolate creations.

And consumers are paying attention. "North Americans are learning to distinguish between 'candy bar' chocolate and the wide variety of gourmet chocolates that are available to us," says Anna Janes, owner of Toronto's CocoMira Confections Inc., agreeing that there is now more high-quality chocolate on the market. As well, she says, "dark chocolate is different than it used to be. Many of us grew up tasting dark chocolate

cination with coffee and wine varieties, there is growing interest in single-origin and heirloom cocoa bean varieties. The terroir, or origin, of cocoa beans is also now increasingly being referred to, as chocolatiers search for beans with unique fruity, nutty or even floral characteristics, depending on the region in which they were grown. Like coffee, cocoa flavour also depends on how it is roasted, fermented and processed, as well as the quality and quantity of ingredients that are added (including sugar and vanilla).

According to Bernard Callebaut, owner of Calgary-based Chocolaterie Bernard Callebaut, cocoa butter content is also important. "For about 10 years I've advertised the cocoa content in our chocolate on the packaging. Not only do we tell the cocoa content but also the cocoa butter content, which is a very important ingredient in quality chocolate, but which is little known by the general public." Callebaut's semi-sweet chocolate contains 60-per-cent cocoa and 37-per-cent cocoa butter, while his bitter-sweet chocolate contains 72-per-cent cocoa and 42-per-cent cocoa butter. With the higher cocoa butter content, chocolate is "thin, smooth on the palate and will melt in your mouth," he says.

Callebaut believes that while new health research may be encouraging chocolate lovers to explore their dark side, he says consumer tastes are generally becoming more mature. "A good comparison is the evolution in coffee," he says, noting that coffee has gone from "hot brown water that cost 50 cents a cup," to a sophisticated, high-end product that commands a higher price point.

The interest in chocolate's health benefits has already prompted more confectionery makers and food manufacturers to add dark cocoa to their products. Saputo's new Hop&Go! Multigrain cereal bars, aimed at consumers looking for a convenient, nutritious yet delicious snack, features a

bar with 70-per-cent cocoa dark chocolate chips. Mars Inc. has also launched CocoaVia in the U.S., a line of good-for-you dark chocolate bars, granola bars and chocolate-covered almonds high in flavanols and enriched with vitamins and plant phytosterols. The company is marketing the snacks on its website as “promoting a healthy heart.”

But chocolate purists aren't so sure that cocoa alone is ready to be marketed as a health food. “Promising customers something specific like a health benefit is quite different than promising a rewarding experience,” says Janes. “We know that we deliver a delicious treat, but how do we evaluate if we are delivering a health benefit?” Callebaut agrees: “We don't advertise the health benefits on the packaging because we want to emphasize the quality of the product. I have always known that there is a nutritional value to cocoa, but more importantly it is key for the flavour.”

Callebaut adds that the quality of other ingredients in chocolate creations also play an important role in cocoa's overall health benefits. “I want to continue improving the quality of my chocolates by lowering the sugar content gradually further, and by always using better ingredients. This year we switched to even more organic ingredients, for example butter, cream, fruit and almonds, because they simply taste better.” Mitchell agrees fresh is best. “Purdy's is all about fresh ingredients, fresh oranges or strawberries and Belgian chocolate,” he says. The company also roasts its own almonds, macadamia nuts and hazelnuts for its giandujas (soft-centre chocolates featuring nut purées). Mitchell says the current buzz around health benefits has allowed producers to build on that momentum by getting more creative with their dark chocolate offerings. “I've seen all sorts of twists on the 70-per-cent cocoa chocolate, including things like adding chipotle or spices. The more ways you can use chocolate the better for all of us in the industry.”

So will the current love affair with cocoa's healthy side be enough to keep dark chocolate on top? Most believe it's the chocolate, not the nutritional benefits, that will ultimately keep con-

sumers interested. “Chocolate/cocoa flavours are the number-1 flavour in North America today, and that status is likely to continue if history is any guide,” says Steve Laning, director of Technical Services, North America, for Milwaukee-based ADM Cocoa. Laning notes that chocolates or cocoa are also “a great platform for delivering other ingredients or supplements of nutritional interest and importance.

Chocolate's connection with ‘good health,’ in other words, if not already so, may soon surpass chocolate's former association with ‘guilt’ and ‘indulgence.’” Janes agrees: “Consumers may buy that first piece of dark chocolate because of the perceived health benefit, but they'll buy it again because it tastes so good.” [E]

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