

An Emotional History of Chocolate

Description



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The world faces an impending [chocolate shortage](#). Simply put, global demand is rapidly outpacing the capacity of cocoa farmers to produce the good. It's a troubling state of affairs: The chocolate makers, Mars, Inc. and Barry Callebaut, have warned consumers that all bets will be off by 2020. Meanwhile, researchers in Central Africa are feverishly at work on trees that could produce seven times the amount of beans as a traditional cocoa tree. But even if cocoa's foremost thought leaders rise to the challenge of the chocolate famine, chocolate will never be the same: Quantity, experts warn, will come at the cost of quality.

It's a difficult reality to wrap one's mind around. Like the ocean closing over Manhattan or countrywide droughts, a world where chocolate is entirely rare or entirely mediocre is a dystopia the likes of which we can scarcely conceive, no matter how the charts bear it out. The prospect has turned me toward reflection and, more still, that age-old propensity to set down in writing whatever is certain to vanish. *So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.* etc., etc. What follows here are notes on chocolate, an emotional history, if you will.

When I was 16, my family hosted two French girls for the summer, eager for their first taste of the all-American life. One afternoon, we took them to an old-fashioned ice cream parlor on the main street of

St. Michaelâ€™s, a provincial town by the Chesapeake Bay. Its shops sell beach accessories and nautical paraphernalia and its street signs are oversized, with old-time cursive lettering. Beyond the brick-lined roads and the modest steeple of St. Michaelâ€™s historic church, the fields of former plantations stretch to the sea.

The ice cream parlor was a cramped, quaint shop. You could take only a few steps inside before running up against the ice cream bar, with its vast array of flavors preserved behind the refrigerated glass. It was mostly a pastel display: bing cherry and mint chocolate chip, rum raisin, peach sorbet, and butter pecan. Patrons stood worshipfully before the bar, their lips moving silently as they read the labels. Overwhelmed by the exoticism of options, the French girls both ordered a single vanilla scoop. *Vanille*. I hesitated between dark chocolate fudge chunk and Dutch chocolate ripple with marshmallow. Oh! *Decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse!*

Watching the ice cream boy scoop from the insipid vanilla batch, my father scoffed, “Might as well order water!” There wasn’t so much as a trace of social embarrassment in his derision. He scoffed loudly and unrepentantly, his contempt as pure as his perfect cone of unadulterated milk chocolate. Like Dante for Beatrice, like Petrarch for Laura, my father has eyes only for chocolate. It can be one flavor among three at a street-side vendor or one of 30 in the finest gelato emporium: It makes no difference. He is a chocolate man, and though generous in most of his judgments, he stands fast on the subject of sweets. Even Godiva’s boxes of assorted chocolates fall short of the mark, with their fruity fillings and nut-laden liquors: The “surprise” they offer isn’t a delight for him but an underhanded deception, a base, personal offense. (Fortunately, the French girls’ English was mediocre enough that they missed the callous jab at their ice cream choice.)



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The origins of taste remain a matter of some scientific and philosophical debate. Can a chocolate

predilection be reduced to some sensitized and highly specialized modification in the taste budsâ€™™ G protein receptors? It seems a bit like reducing the soul to the arbitrary soup of hormones in the brain. Is it better, then, to say that a cultural inundation in childhood conditions us toward certain preferences? Thatâ€™™s a poor improvement, analogous to asserting that the individual is merely the product of a series of circumstances â€” manufactured, contingent, the thing made rather than the thing that makes. I must believe â€” I need to believe â€” that I have chosen chocolate, not by the fate of biology nor by casual happenstance (indeed, there is nothing casual about this passion) but through the willful force of personality that finds amidst the assorted confections of this world its singular culinary expression.

Most important in this catalog of unanswerable queries: Can we trust the judgment of anyone who chooses another candy or flavor over chocolate? The truth is that Iâ€™™ve inherited my fatherâ€™™s chocophilia â€” as well as the tendency, which **David Hume** well understood, to â€œcall barbarous whatever departs widely from our own taste and apprehension.â€ For while I hold my relationship to chocolate matchless, few things are so grossly incomprehensible to me as a fellow human who dislikes chocolate.

There are always certain individuals crassly eager to announce their aversion â€” as though itâ€™™s some mark of their uniqueness: â€œI donâ€™™t like chocolate. I donâ€™™t know, I just never have.â€ Instinctively, Iâ€™™m overcome with disgust, amplified by a profound disbelief in their lack of common decency. Surely, people should keep such indelicate opinions to themselves. â€œWho are you?â€ I want to ask (and sometimes do). They think Iâ€™™m joking, but the humor is only a mask for the fundamental existential anxieties: Can I have anything to say or share with this alien creature, this charlatan masquerading as a member of my own species? What common ground could we possibly find if we diverge on so basic a tenet? Iâ€™™m jolted all over again by the violence of difference and of subjectivity. And though I strive to remind myself that he or she is a person too, it seems inevitable: We have come to the end of the road together.



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Chocolate carries the weight of a moral standard in my family. We stock up well in advance of major chocolate holidays – Halloween, Christmas, Valentine’s Day, Easter, pretexts all of them for the worship of the central god. During dry spells, my mother maintains a personal cache of chocolate bars, which she is compelled to move to new hiding places whenever she suspects detection on the part of her children. It’s a covert operation, chronically marked by secrecy, accusation, and betrayal. We protest vehemently against her allegations of theft. To do otherwise is unthinkable; there is no forgiveness. Unable to prove our guilt – and we are consistently guilty – she continues to suspect us, cultivating a precious resentment.

But though chocolate threatens at times to tear us asunder, it also draws us together against an intolerable outside – an outside of Pop Rocks, Smarties, Pixie Stix, and Starburst. Cotton candy, Swedish Fish, Skittles, Twizzlers, jelly beans, gummy worms, Warheads, gobstoppers: Oceans of sugary dross. Dessert without chocolate is also a bad joke. We don’t deal in key lime pie or carrot cake. If fruit is served, there’s grumbling among the ranks until chocolate is brought out to ease the blight.

On one particularly ill-starred Thanksgiving, my aunt tried to make pumpkin mousse in the spirit of introducing something more seasonally appropriate to the meal. (The classic dessert, for some years, had been my mother’s chocolate mousse.) The pumpkin mousse was widely understood as an act of aggression. Rumor of its preparation began circulating among the children some days in advance. Word of the mounting dissension eventually reached a cousin in Vietnam; he deliberated on the turn of events via Skype.

When the mousse was finally presented (watery, vomit-colored), a few “good sports” among the adults made a show of serving themselves a representative helping. (My father, naturally, was not one of them.) Some attempts at false praise were made and quickly dropped: The dishonesty was too flagrant to sustain. There was a renewed rush of gratitude for the chocolate mousse, which my mother had persisted in making despite (and because) of the pumpkin mousse’s unseemly arrival. But there can be no doubt, feelings were bruised, old rivalries rekindled: Chocolate versus pumpkin, mother versus aunt. Everyone did their best to look away as the pumpkin mousse was returned to the kitchen in quiet disgrace.

Another year, a Toblerone bar of white chocolate sat untouched for weeks in a kitchen cupboard. No one was sure where it had come from – it appeared on our doorstep, so to speak, like a stray cat (wan, pitiful) – and no one ate it. But no one felt comfortable getting rid of it either. It was chocolate, after all, or sort of, its bastardized, de-cocoaized second cousin. We would rummage through the cupboard whenever a craving struck, and even if the white chocolate bar was the only remaining sweet in the house, we would leave it on its shelf, lonely and unwanted. The shelf, I remember thinking, actually looked more desolate with that lone white chocolate bar than if it had been completely bare.

Even within our harmonious-seeming chocolate kingdom, however, there are tribes and divisions. My little sister has a soft spot for Nutella, with its smooth hazelnut flavoring. She was once discovered pacing the kitchen at 3 a.m. with the Nutella jar and a large spoon in hand. No questions were asked. My mother prefers dark chocolate. My father, ever the milk chocolate purist, dutifully buys it for her every birthday though he can’t help qualifying the gift with expressions of incredulity: “I don’t understand the dark chocolate. It does nothing for me.”

Meanwhile, an uncle goes in for chocolate with caramel, which I think it's fair to say is a case of playing at the limits. Chocolate with caramel raises questions we'd rather not raise, like, Is the caramel just an embellishment, a sticky, saccharine garnish, for the chocolate? Or is the caramel in fact the main event and the chocolate merely its profane casing? No one asks this outright for fear of the answer, but it hangs uncomfortably in the air. Glances are exchanged. Someone quickly moves the conversation along. Despite the suspicions, my uncle has managed to keep his secret quiet for decades, but in a private conversation, which I won't soon forget, he confessed to me that he's never really liked chocolate, that he's always preferred caramel. He takes this, I believe, to be one of the signature marks of his difference from the rest of the family.

I consider myself progressively tolerant when it comes to chocolate discriminations. I can allow the merits of a raspberry chocolate; I can, on occasion, entertain a caramel; but I dream in chocolate ganache and espresso praline cream.



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Chocolate, I'm compelled to conclude, retains its individualizing quality after all. Familial loyalties and customs play some generalizing role in the cultivation of the passion, but in the end chocolate calls to the individual and calls to each in different ways. I can't rid myself of the idea that the answer lies somewhere near the origin: Was there a primal chocolate scene, buried amidst my earliest memories, that sent me chasing that first gustatory ecstasy forever more, like a heroine addict in destructive and futile pursuit of his original, inimitable high? A dropped M&M, the first taste of birthday cake, a spoonful of ice cream proffered from my mother's bowl? Untraceable now, whatever it was. I know only this: There was chocolate. There will be chocolate.

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