

## Life as a Chocolate Taster

### Description



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It's an enviable job, there's no denying. So what makes a good chocolate bar, and can it be good for us?

Quality chocolate is 50 per cent great cocoa beans, and 50 per cent what you do with them. Rubbish beans make rubbish chocolate, but great beans in the wrong hands are also a disaster. Making chocolate is a science but it's also a very organic and creative process. You have to take your time, taste, think, make, re-taste and make again.

When it comes to choosing the beans, you want the best varieties, cultivated and grown by expert farmers and carefully processed and dried. Like most ingredients it's about using the best you can afford. After that it's what you love and get excited about. I can't imagine making chocolate with a mediocre bean. It has to be good enough to ignite my passion.

The recipe is also important; ultimately you want to showcase the bean's potential. Other ingredients like sugar, milk, caramels, vanilla and nuts should support the flavour profile of the cocoa. They shouldn't fight or overpower the bean, but bring out its best, creating harmony and synergy. This is the art of the chocolatier.

As a broad rule, the fewer the ingredients the better; cocoa and sugar are all you need in a dark chocolate. For milk chocolate additional dried milk or cream is also required. White chocolate is a mixture of cocoa butter, dried milk and sugar. Caramel chocolate is a milk chocolate with caramelised milk and sugar.

Absolutely avoid cheap vegetable fats and excess sugar, these are fillers and dilute the cocoa experience. A good dark chocolate should be 70% or above in cocoa, milk chocolate 40% or above, and white and caramels 35% or above.

More cocoa means less sugar, and a big cocoa hit that satisfies your chocolate cravings with less. Go for the highest cocoa percentage you can take to maximise cocoa's amazing power while minimising empty calories.

## Is it really good for you?

People have known for centuries that cocoa and chocolate can make us feel good both physically and mentally, but modern research has only recently begun to show us how.

It turns out that chocolate is full of natural compounds that have positive effects on our physical and mental health, including:

### Antioxidants

Chocolate is naturally high in two kinds of antioxidants: polyphenols, a group of protective chemicals vital for our general health, and catechins, which protect the cells of the cocoa plant. Research suggests that they may do the same for the human body.

### Theobromine

Theobromine drives the production of serotonin, one of the body's "love drugs", which helps create a positive mood, improves sleeping patterns, and promotes a healthy appetite.

### Phenylethylamine (PEA)

PEA is present in chocolate in small quantities. It is thought to trigger the release of dopamine, another natural feel-good compound with a positive effect on our mood and sense of well-being. If you're madly in love and feeling restless with butterflies in your tummy, that'll be the dopamine.

### Anandamide

Anandamide is an extraordinary chemical known as a cannabinoid. Its name derives from the Sanskrit word "ananda", which means "bliss". Anandamide produces a feeling of euphoria, which may account for why people feel so happy when they eat chocolate.

## Which type of chocolate is better?

Centuries ago, Mayans revered the potent cocoa bean so much that it was worshipped as a gift from the gods. Somewhere along the way, the power of cocoa has been lost in translation.

Milk chocolate is the most popular chocolate in the UK but over the years it has become sweeter and sweeter. Today, most milk chocolate contains twice as much sugar as cocoa. The fact that sugar is a

tenth of the cost of cocoa perhaps explains why this is.

A high cocoa content means that it takes just a smaller portion to satisfy a chocolate craving.

## How to taste chocolate

Prepare yourself – you need to be in the right mood for tasting, feeling relaxed and open to the experience. Do your tastings about an hour after a light meal, and not after strong foods like chilli, coffee or mint.

Your chocolate should be at room temperature and not too warm or cold (18 – 20 °C is ideal). Too cold and the cocoa butter doesn't melt, making the chocolate feel waxy; too warm and the flavours are muddled and messy.

Place a small piece of chocolate in your mouth and, without breathing through your nose, chew slowly and allow it to melt. Then breathe out through your nose and allow the flavour experience to wash over you. You're ready to taste.

Repeat this exercise. This time as you chew think about how the chocolate melts and what this feels like. As you breathe, what are your first impressions, which flavours pop up and which flavours linger. Record the experience. Taste at different times of the day and you will have a different experience.

Good tasters learn how to describe what they experience in their nose and mouth so they can share it with others. This takes time. Try tasting with other people and sharing your notes and you will quickly build up a tasting vocabulary. It's undoubtedly fun, so enjoy the journey. Happy tasting.

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[Adam Geileskey](#)

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### Date Created

October 21, 2014

### Author

sephra