

How to be a Chocolate Snob!

Description



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Today, it's certified chocolate tasters speaking up for the virtues of "single estate beans" and "organic palm sugar" and pointing out how this gourmet food is a cut above Cadbury's. They are doing for chocolate what sommeliers and coffee connoisseurs did for fine wine and plantation coffee. They're showing people how to read ingredient tables, how to appreciate the packaging, the bar's back-story, the texture, scents, snap, flavour notes, and aftertaste.

Nitin Chordia, who has made a career of teaching people how to savour its quality, admits it's not easy to convert a country raised on Dairy Milk bars, with their muddy brown sweetness and pocket-friendly pricing, to fine chocolate, with its higher cocoa content, experimental flavours and steep cost. "The first step is to help people understand the difference between it and sugar craving. Usually, we want sugar when we think we want chocolate, in which case you may as well eat an Indian sweet," he says.

Chordia is, however, also quick to disabuse people of the notion that the darker the chocolate, the more superior it is. "From a sensory, taste and health perspective, high cocoa content is preferable, but an 80% cacao bar from Ghana is not the same as an 80% Madagascar bean; the latter is more palatable with fruity notes," he explains. At this point, he will talk of the origins of a bean and how its topography, weather, soil conditions, post-harvesting processes and the genetic properties of the bean itself (whether of the Criollo, Trinitario or Forastero variety), influences the profile of the chocolate. Chordia, who runs Cocoatrait in Chennai, is about to open a tasting and making school called Cocoashala, which will offer certified courses from London's International Institute of Chocolate Tasting.

Top shops that import fine chocolate and stock indigenous brands like Earthloaf, Mason & Co, or Bean Therapy, know that such classes give them marketing mileage. Helping a consumer understand why she should spend Rs 270 on a 70g bar makes her buy. When Godrej Nature's Basket invited a connoisseur from Singapore to conduct their first master-class three years ago, they were surprised to find nearly 100 people turn up at their Bandra outlet. "At the tasting, people's first reaction was surprise. They didn't know it had such a breadth of flavor profiles," says Mohit Khattar, MD of the chain. Now, they routinely organize appreciation classes across the country. Not only have the sales risen but people have also become more specific about what they want: a Venezuela Couverture 72% for instance, or a 55% Coconut Milk Dark.

There's a growing tribe of aficionados willing to put their money where their mouth is. Technopak's study of the Indian market reveals that premium and luxury chocolate account for 15%-18% of the market share, valued at Rs 75 billion. The report predicts that this category will grow 30-35% in the next couple of years, compared to a 20% growth of commercial milk chocolate brands.

"The fine chocolate movement in India is in its nascent stages, however, there's growing interest in the field," observes Arti Dhingra, graduate of the Valrhona L'Ecole du Grand Chocolat in France and teacher-chocolatier at Art Chocolat, a Delhi-based academy. But just because it's artisanal doesn't instantly make it palatable. In fact, with chocolatiers experimenting with unorthodox ingredients — from Gondhoraj (a citrus fruit from Bengal and Assam) to Guntur chilli, black pepper and sea salt — boutique chocolate can be unappetizing to first-timers. "Artisanal chocolate can be like beer and wine when consumed for the first time," admits Chordia, who has even had an onion and garlic chocolate bar. "Eight out of 10 people may not like the way it tastes, but the two who do, will drive sales." He says good chocolatiers know how to fold new flavours into the product so that they are subtle and gradually revealing.

For Sanjoy Solomon, the 28-year-old creator of the brand Bean Therapy in Mumbai, tastings are the (poor) artisanal chocolate's answer to Big Chocolate's ads and promos. Once someone samples a bar, they'll order it online even if it's not available in their neighbourhood. Promoters though are hard at work, sowing the bean where it will grow — at brunches and wine pairings. While Park Hyatt Chennai has developed three chocolate-influenced menus so far, Sula Vineyards shows dilettantes how best to pair chocolate and wine. At their sessions, they've matched Reisling with Ecuador single-origin dark chocolate bars with sea salt, and Dindori Shiraz with a dark-red chilli bar.

Yet, no matter how judicious their palates, epicures will always be outflanked by those for whom: anything's good as long as it's made of chocolate.

How to enjoy chocolate:

Chocolate has over 800 documented flavour notes compared to 300 in wine. Hereâ€™s how to navigate the pleasure garden:

- Never taste chocolate cold. Room temperatureâ€™s best. Rubbing it a little coaxes out the flavours.
- Surface should be free of bubbles, blemishes or unevenness. It should have a radiant sheen.
- Break it to hear a sharp â€˜snapâ€™ (not a dull thud).
- Place it on the tongue and allow it to melt slowly. Donâ€™t chew immediately. Note the flavours unfolding from beginning, middle to end â€“ fruity, floral, earthy, spicy. As you progress you may detect more distinct flavours: vanilla, orange blossom, ginger, and so on.

[Joeanna Rebello](#)

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Author

sephra

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