

Sweetening gloomy Russia, one chocolate bar at a time

Description



Keep calm and eat some very expensive chocolate.

MOSCOW: When days are dark, friends are few and the state of your bank account makes you want to weep, there is only one thing you can do in bleak, crisis-hit Russia.

Keep calm and eat some very expensive chocolate.

That was the message from artisanal chocolatiers in Moscow who attended this past week the capital's first chocolate fair in seven years, in a sign that even as their wallets are battered by the dismal state of the ruble, there are some luxuries Russians are not willing to give up.

It's surprising but, even though there is a crisis, the demand for artisanal chocolate has increased," said Vitaly Ponomarev, a chocolatier with Russia's upmarket Confael.

Known for boosting the happiness hormone serotonin in the brain, chocolate "is apparently helping Russians to deal with the crisis in a lighter way, to not fall into depression," he added.

And it isn't hard to see why Russians would be down in the dumps.

Western sanctions for the country's role in backing separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine, combined with falling prices of oil – a key pillar of Russia's economy – led to a dramatic crash of the ruble in December.

And Russians have seen their grocery bills skyrocket as inflation rose to nearly 17 percent in February, with the prices of fruit and vegetables alone jumping 22 per cent in one month. The price of cocoa has also soared.

But while they may rein in spending on certain items, when it comes to chocolate some Russians insist on enjoying the melt-in-your-mouth treat, even though its often exorbitant price may melt their savings.

“The crisis has in no way affected the sale of artisanal chocolate,” said Dmitry Abrikosov, owner of one of Russia's oldest chocolate brands Abrikosov Sons.

“A bar of artisanal chocolate at 1,000 rubles (15 euros, \$16) gives a completely different sensation to an industrial chocolate bar which sells for about 70 rubles, he said.

“And people are willing to pay for that.”



A chocolate a day

Russia's chocolate industry has taken off in recent years, with several artisanal chocolate companies setting up shop in Moscow and other cities.

“Many people in Russia are currently investing their money and knowledge in the industry,” said Abrikosov.

Of about 30 participants at the Chocolate Fair in Moscow, 20 were local chocolatiers who could boast that even if cocoa beans were imported, their final products were made at home, an important point at a time that many items are no longer available in the country due to a retaliatory ban that Moscow slapped on western imports in August.

And with the current pall of pessimism hanging over the country, chocolatiers at the fair highlighted the depression-fighting qualities of their product.

“Chocolate is an extraordinary food! even in difficult times it gives a bit of happiness,” said Francois Jeantet, the French founder of the fair.

Abrikosov said that luxury artisanal chocolate was also much loved by Russians through freezing winters as it “lifts spirits and boosts immunity.”

“Chocolate is the best way to fight depression,” said fair organiser Yevgeny Trostentsov.

“And in the current situation it appears one should eat some every day not to lose one’s optimism.”

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