

YUMMY NORTHWEST

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Happy Fourth!

Raise a cup of hot chocolate: with this issue, **Yummy Northwest** turns four.

This month, instead of rating hot chocolate, Yummy asked: Which chocolate tastes the best? After all, the best hot chocolate must begin with great-tasting chocolate.

Read on to find out which local chocolatier and chocolate maker won “best” and “worst” in Yummy’s chocolate taste test.

Chocolate makers vs. chocolatiers

Chocolate makers take raw cacao pods and grind and sift and eventually produce a chocolate liqueur, the raw form of what we end up eventually eating.

Makers like Hershey’s, Mars, and Theo, control the entire process, from pod to chocolate bar. Others, such as Blommer, sell the chocolate liqueur they make, called couverture, to folks who then concentrate solely on the edible end-product. These folks are known as chocolatiers and create the delectable truffles, bars, and hot chocolate mixes that we so long for.

While chocolatiers like Dilettante can do a lot of fun things with couverture, it is the makers who control the basic quality of the chocolate. The place of origin of the pods can make a huge difference in taste, and even each crop can have its unique characteristics.

As the pods go through production, from being roasted to crushed (to produce nibs) to conched (to reduce acid), professional tasters keep track of how long each step should take for maximum flavor.

Nibs, crunchy bits of roasted unsweetened



The chocolates

Here’s what this month’s tasters tried, in order of preference. Percentages show the amount of chocolate in the bar.

Dilettante (c)
Bittersweet (72%)

Theo (m)
Madagascar (65%)

Valrhona (c)
Bittersweet (61%)

Hershey’s (m)
Special Dark (45%)

Lindt (m)
Excellence 70%

Dagoba (m)
New Moon (74%)

Hershey’s (m)
Extra Dark (60%)

Dagoba (m)
Conacado (73%)

Endangered Species (c)
Supreme Dark Chocolate (72%)

Lindt (m)
Excellence 85%

Scharffen Berger (m)
Bittersweet (70%)

Theo (m)
Venezuela (91%)

(c) = chocolatier
(m) = chocolate maker

bean, are the healthiest form of chocolate you can eat. But you’re more likely to consume a processed 2-ounce bar, whittled down from two whole cacao pods.

To make that bar edible, sugar and, sometimes, milk are added. When the amount of actual chocolate in the bar is under 40 percent, it is called milk chocolate. With more chocolate than that, it is considered dark – bittersweet or semisweet, depending on the amount of sugar. Don’t assume dark chocolate has no milk – always check the label.

Taste determines the percentage of chocolate each cook prefers in baked goods, but around 70 percent is considered a good choice for hot chocolate.

The tasting

A group of eager volunteers gathered to taste local, national, and international brands of chocolate.

Because tastes differ, there was no clear winner, but all agreed the worst-tasting was Theo’s Venezuela. “Yuck,” said one taster. “The only chocolate I’ve ever spit out.”

Doubtless the high percentage of chocolate (91 percent) didn’t leave room for enough sugar. But a few tasters said they would be happy to use it in baking. A later private tasting by the Yummy editor confirmed that adding sugar and milk created an excellent hot chocolate.

The winner by a taste bud was Dilettante’s Bittersweet: “spicy” and “woody,” with a “smooth aftertaste.”

Following close behind in tandem were Theo’s Madagascar and the only European-made brand, France’s Valrhona Bittersweet. Madagascar was “smooth,” “exotic,” and “fruity,” while Valrhona

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was “rich and dark,” “pleasant,” and “very tasty – my favorite.”

Next came Hershey’s Special Dark, a near-milk chocolate at 45 percent. Tasters generally agreed it was what they considered “real” chocolate since Hershey’s was the brand they grew up with. Hershey’s Extra Dark, however, came lower in the ranking with an aftertaste that one taster said had “a short lifespan.”

Some comments for other chocolates were as follows:

Lindt Excellence 70%: “a little hard to eat at first but leaves nice aftertaste”.

Dagoba New Moon: “smooth, dark, rich flavor”.

Dagoba Conacado: “smokey,” “bitter,” “harsh”.

Endangered Species Supreme Dark Chocolate: “excellent; cinnamon aftertaste,” “bland,” “like vinegar”.

Lindt Excellence 85%: “sour,” “dull,” “bitter”.

Scharffen Berger Bittersweet: “bland,” “bitter,” “awful”.

Taste it yourself

Gather your friends and lots of chocolate and have your own tasting party.

Cut the chocolate into small pieces – smaller than 1-inch square – and to avoid prejudice, turn them over so no identifying marks show. Mark the plates to keep track of names.

Taste six chocolates at a time so palates are not overwhelmed, sipping water and eating plain crackers between each. Wait 15 minutes to try six more.

While discussion is inevitable, encourage participants to be quiet until everyone has tasted. Chocolate has subtleties that deserve meditative consideration.

Pay attention to appearance (color? shiny? dull?), aroma, feel (does it snap when broken? does it melt easily?), taste (let it melt slowly in your mouth), and aftertaste.

For more tasting tips, visit www.lindtusa.com/chocomania_tasting.cfm and www.richart-chocolates.com/b2c/chocolate/history_of_chocolate/5.

Ultimately, the best chocolate is what you yourself like.

DIYC

Do-it-yourself chocolate... Well, yes, you can make chocolate in the comfort of your own home, but it’s much easier to buy it. Still, if you feel like experimenting, there is a way.

For your first effort, get a mortar and pestle and some chocolate nibs. Nibs are bits of roasted cacao, which you can purchase online from Dagoba. In Seattle, you can buy nibs at Rose’s Chocolate Treasures in the Pike Place Market (www.roseschocolatetreasures.com) or at Theo in Fremont.

Crush the nibs with sugar. For bittersweet, about 25 percent of the mixture should be sugar, but add more according to taste.

The result will be primitive but definitely chocolate.

For more information on do-it-yourself chocolate making, go to Chocolate Alchemy at www.chocolatealchemy.com.

Or...just taste the nibs. Eat them plain (they are chocolatey, crunchy, nutty), add them to cereal, put them on top of ice cream, or use them any way you can think of.

Nibs are as close to “real” chocolate as you can get and contain all the health benefits you read about. So enjoy without guilt!

Two special places

Although it’s difficult to single out any two places that sell chocolate as being any better than the others, the following provide services that deserve some outstanding recognition.

Cowgirl Chocolates

In Moscow, Idaho, these gals like things hot, adding heat to some of their mighty fine truffles and hot chocolate mixes. Don’t be afraid to order the stuff with pepper. It adds a kick in the back of the throat but is otherwise delicious.

The gals deserve special recognition, however, because of their customer service and the care that goes into wrapping up your order. I won’t spoil the surprise; buy something to see what I mean.

www.cowgirlchocolates.com

Theo Chocolate

Seattle is fortunate to be home to the only organic chocolate maker in the United States. The company also uses local products when they can.

Growing chocolate is highly labor intensive, which means exploitation and slavery are still found on plantations. Theo checks out the sources and uses only Fair Trade products, a designation that ensures fair wages and good working conditions.

Open since 2006, the company is still small and produces handmade products and provides service that makes customers feel right at home.

To taste Theo chocolates, visit their store at 3400 Phinney, Seattle. You can join a daily tour of the factory at 11 a.m., or visit during the Fremont Art Walk, the first Friday of every month, 6–9 p.m.

www.theochocolate.com

About Yummy Northwest

Each monthly issue highlights an edible delight available in the Pacific Northwest.

Contact the editor

Comments, corrections, topic ideas, and submissions are all welcome at Yummy_Northwest@hotmail.com. View archives at yummynorthwest.com.