

THE ART OF DARKNESS

CHOCOLATE'S VARIETY AND COMPLEXITY MAKES IT A CHALLENGING MATCH FOR WINE LOVERS.

BY TIM MORIARTY • PHOTOS BY JON VAN GORDER

Wine and chocolate: There are so many parallels in the ways they are created, marketed and appreciated that to track the similarities point by point would be to run the metaphor into the ground. But here's one: You enter a chocolate shop with a friend. You order a few pieces of milk chocolate. He orders an El Michel grand cru criollo single-plantation Hacienda Concepción Venezuelan 77 percent. Both shop-

keeper and friend smirk at you as you try to enjoy your bonbons. Substitute vintner's reserve Cabernet and jug rosé, and perhaps you can identify.

But how is one chocolate different from, or better than, another? Wine enthusiasts are familiar with the variables of climate, *terroir*, viticultural methods and winemaking, the alchemy and serendipity that can raise one Merlot above another. There are also many variables that affect chocolate quality.

First, understand that while wine can be made at home, chocolate-making from cacao beans is an industrial process. Here's how it works: Cacao beans are grown on plantations. They are purchased and made into chocolate by a small number of chocolate companies—there are maybe 10 in the United States. The chocolate companies sell their chocolate products in bulk to candy makers, of which there are thousands. These candy companies and individual artisans make the bonbons that are



Cross-over dreams: Some wines, such as this Port, are flavored with chocolate, while chocolate sauces are sometimes flavored with Port or Cabernet.



sold to shops or directly to the consumer. Quality can vary widely from one chocolate company to another. The best candy makers make the effort to obtain the highest quality chocolates to use in their candies. The best candy shops buy from the best candy makers. The smartest chocoholics buy from the best shops or candy makers.

Along the way, these are the three quality controls and variables in the crafting of chocolate:

- *The beans.* Chocolate is the product of the cacao bean. The beans are found in pods that grow on trees that thrive only in geographical areas within 20 degrees (roughly 600 miles) north and south of the equator—primarily Central and South America, the Caribbean, the West Indies, Indonesia and Africa. There are three basic types of cacao beans. Criollo is considered the best, offering the most complex flavors, but yields of these beans are low. Forastero is the hardy, high-

yield bean, but only skillful roasting can bring out more than one-dimensional flavor. The third type is a hybrid of the first two: Trinitario, which is high in cocoa butter, and whose quality in terms of flavor is, in the opinion of many chocolatiers, growing year by year. The quality of beans of all three types varies from place to place, year to year. They are fermented at the plantation, and if that process is mishandled, it's time for "When Good Beans Go Bad."

PAIRINGS

Port, Champagne, coffee, Cabernet, Cognac and fruit-flavored liqueurs are among the beverages most often cited as ideal pairings with chocolate.



You will find some high-end chocolates, like some of the products of El Rey or Valrhona, that are made from 100 percent criollo, and the term “grand cru” is now being used to denote a chocolate made from a single type of bean. But most chocolates are the result of a blend of beans. So the chocolate companies that can source the best beans of all types are on track to make the best chocolate.

• *The manufacture.* The fermented beans are blended, roasted, pulverized, mixed with other ingredients (see the recipe, next item), then the thick liquid chocolate is conched (stirred in huge vats for days). All of these steps require skill and diligence. In order to properly blend the different types of beans, from the many different source countries, a chocolatier must have experience, intuition and sensory organs from another planet. Roasting is also never routine, and always crucial. Conching time is a measure of commitment. But the element that perhaps speaks loudest of a company's commitment to quality is...

• *The recipe.* After being pulverized, the cocoa butter is removed and the beans are reduced to a paste, called cocoa solids, cocoa mass or chocolate liquor. This is the essence,

the chocolate stuff. This paste is placed in a mixer with precise formulas of sugar, cocoa butter, vanilla (or vanillin) and lecithin (a soybean by-product, used as an emulsifier and stabilizer). For milk chocolate, milk products will be part of the blend.

Obviously, the quality of these additional ingredients and the proportions are crucial to the quality of the finished chocolate. For example, how much of the chocolate you're enjoying is composed of cocoa solids and how much is added sugar? This is an aesthetic issue, and a budget issue: Sugar costs somewhere between a fifth and a quarter as much as cocoa beans, and is about a tenth as expensive as pure cocoa butter. Some manufacturers try to disguise inferior beans with overdoses of sugar. They cut corners by using vanillin instead of real vanilla. They might introduce other fats, such as vegetable fats, rather than using 100 percent cocoa butter.

Tasting Quality

To properly taste chocolate, a small amount should be placed on the tongue and left to melt. The first sensation you have should not be overwhelming sweetness. The chocolate should melt uniformly and smoothly; gritti-

ness is an indication that too much sugar was used. There should not be a waxy or greasy texture. It should be balanced between sweet and bitter. The vanilla should be subtle, not striking, and not artificial tasting. The chocolate should have a good, long finish, with no chemical aftertaste.

If you're a collector of flavor notes, here are some to look for, especially in superdark chocolates: Primary are fruitiness, nuttiness and highlights of vanilla or caramel. Nuances of chocolate flavor are often compared to flower blossoms, to states of nature as in smoke or earth scents, and teas. Other positive descriptive terms include fudgy, fresh, buttery, rich, intense, clean and consistent. Negatives? Thin, artificial, medicinal, bitter, odd, soapy, harsh, over-sweet, sour milk, cheesy, dusty, musty, chalky, harsh, sour, flat, perfumey, metallic, rubbery, fishy and cardboard-like. Low-quality chocolates can offer smoky, burnt flavors, or they will be overly sweet.

When analyzing the texture of a pure chocolate, you want to find smooth, velvety and creamy. You want to avoid gummy, lumpy, sticky, crumbly, greasy, powdery, sandy, coarse and waxy. When enjoying filled chocolates, look for the coating to be thin,

and the filling to be in harmony with—not fighting—the chocolate’s flavor.

None of this addresses the issue of why chocolate is so delicious in the first place. We love chocolate for a myriad of reasons, but dispensing with the emotional, sense-memory factors, the science of chocolate pizzazz is in its complexity and its fat. Cocoa butter melts almost exactly at body temperature, which accounts for chocolate’s luxurious mouthfeel and at least some of its marvelous flavor. As for complexity, scientists have identified some 400 compounds in the cacao bean, twice as many as the closest other food. They think there may be as many as 1,200. These compounds include puzzling tongue twisters like polyphenols, pectins and amino acids, but also more familiar items like serotonin, a mood-enhancing hormone also found in the brain; tyramine, caffeine and theobromine, which are stimulants; and phenylethylamine, a chemical also found in the brain, which is released during moments of love and arousal. Phenylethylamine is the one associated with chocolate’s supposed aphrodisiacal properties, a myth that is too much fun to demolish.

The Pairings Puzzle

Introduce the subject of pairing wine and chocolate to a winemaker, and you will often get a slow, careful answer intended to steer the conversation elsewhere. Run up and down the Napa Valley, asking winemakers about wine and chocolate, as I did years ago, and you will feel like one of those TV detectives in a strange town, stirring up trouble, stickin’ his nose where it don’t belong.

Many winemakers don’t want a person’s experience of their wines compromised by the power and decadence of the world’s favorite flavor. Not surprisingly, chocolatiers want to protect the nuances of their chocolates from an overpowering wine pairing.

In a survey of chocolatiers and winemakers at the Chocolate Show in New York City, the beverages most consistently mentioned as ideal pairings for chocolate were, in order, Port, coffee and Cabernet Sauvignon. Other suggestions included Champagne, Banyuls, fruit-flavored liqueurs such as Chambord or Prime Arance, dry Bourbon (Booker’s, Han-

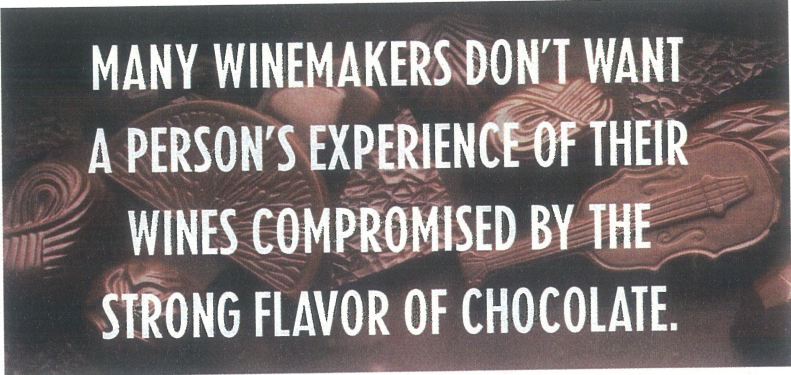
cock’s Reserve, Pappy Van Winkle), Cognac or Armagnac (Delemain was suggested) and Earl Grey tea.

“I like the complexity of wine in itself,” insists Martine Leventer Pechenik, chocolatier and owner of Martine’s Chocolates, which is located in Bloomingdale’s flagship New York store. “I prefer coffee with dark chocolate. There is a bitterness in the coffee that brings out the sweetness and the more elaborate flavors in the chocolate.”

“Port does pair well with chocolate, but not in a broad sense,” said Holly Evans, marketing manager for the House of Sandeman. “Each Port can be paired with a specific chocolate. The vanilla, dried fig and apricot flavors of a tawny Port really go well with white chocolate. But if you taste the tawny

have acidity and you have sweet, it’s too much for a dry wine.” If wine must be the choice, Aiken feels that a young, fruity Cabernet might stand up to chocolate where an aged, tannic or oaky Cabernet may well be overpowered by it.

The *Wine Enthusiast* staff basically agrees. Our New York tasting panel of Mark Mazur, Joe Czerwinski and Daryna McKeand recently sampled a 66 percent dark chocolate with a vintage Port, a medium-weight Cabernet Sauvignon, a Banyuls, two dessert wines and a cup of brewed coffee *ordinaire*. All agreed that under these conditions, the Banyuls was the best pairing; its acidity, and a certain spritz detected by some panelists, cut right through the chocolate. The coffee was “just okay.” Other conclusions: Dark choco-



MANY WINEMAKERS DON'T WANT
A PERSON'S EXPERIENCE OF THEIR
WINES COMPROMISED BY THE
STRONG FLAVOR OF CHOCOLATE.

with a darker chocolate, the flavors tend to fight each other. Dark chocolate needs to be paired with a ruby or a vintage-style Port. The more complex the wine, the more complex the chocolate. A vintage Port has the tannins and the backbone to stand up, otherwise the bittersweet totally overwhelms it.”

Joel Aiken, winemaker for Beaulieu Vineyards, is a man who knows chocolate and wine. As part of his Winemaker’s Table line of foods sold at his winery and through its website, he is producing a line of Port and Cabernet chocolate sauces and bonbons. Aiken doesn’t feel that the dry-sweet balance that people look for in this pairing works at all. “A lot of people say Cabernet and chocolate is a perfect match. My feeling is that, when I have a dry wine, say a Cabernet, food with a lot of sweetness in it will overpower it. The sugar makes the dry wine appear thin. You

lates make dry wines seem weak; milk chocolates or milder chocolates might work better. Chocolate and Port or chocolate and Cabernet are understandable pairings, because there are sometimes chocolate notes in those wines. And these oenophiles could not help but generalize: The wine should always be sweeter than the dessert, otherwise the wine’s character is going to be overwhelmed.

In short: Wine enthusiasts will want a full-bodied, fruity-to-all-out-sweet wine so that it rises above the chocolate, and a chocolate lover will want a dry wine so that the chocolate’s flavor shines. People who love both must grope their way through a maze of variables to find the individual pairing that suits them best. But take heart, there are tougher ways to prepare for your next dinner party than taste-testing some wine-and-chocolate combinations yourself.

PAIRINGS

THE DARK AGES The latest trend in chocolate among the cognoscenti is superdark chocolate. Those are chocolates that contain a high percentage of cocoa solids; in other words, real chocolate stuff. Superdarks contain 66 percent, 77 percent and even up into the 80 percent-plus cocoa solids stratosphere. To put those numbers in perspective: Milk chocolates contain approximately 10 percent cocoa solids. Semisweet and bittersweet chocolates—the dark chocolates of the old days—contain 35 percent. Chocolate baking bars are 100 percent cocoa solids. Ever tried one? Tastes like aspirin. So superdarks in the 80-percent range are flirting with serious overload.

Anyone who calls him- or herself a chocolate lover should give superdarks a go. They deliver serious chocolate wallop, greater nuances of flavor, more character and, when made properly, deliver the same luxurious mouthfeel as their less-dark counterparts. They satisfy a chocolate craving in just a few bites.

And that may be why superdarks are so hot: They're the most streamlined and efficient delivery system of chocolate's flavor and mouthfeel known to man—chocolates for the 21st century.

At the same time: relax. Don't feel guilty about loving milk chocolate. Milk chocolate offers a buttery smooth, silky and wonderfully chocolatey experience, and is the world's favorite chocolate in every country except France. (Those parallels with wine just won't stop, will they?) The point is, if you're going to indulge, choose quality chocolate, no matter how dark.

HAUTE CHOCOLATE

These are some of the best chocolatiers and chocolate companies in the U.S. and Canada. Prices will vary widely, anywhere from \$30 a pound up to \$60 a pound, so shop carefully. Troll the websites, and you find that most of these chocolatiers offer various assortments of solid pieces of dark, milk, and white chocolates, truffles, filled chocolates, bars (including superdarks), plus sauces, barks, nut products and caramels. All will ship their chocolates fresh to you and your Valentine.

SUPERDARK SUPERSTARS

Chocolates El Rey
800/357-3999
www.chocolates-elrey.com

Michel Cluizel
www.culinarycafe.com

Scharffen Berger
800/930-4528
www.scharffenberger.com

Valrhona
www.chocolat.com

AMERICAN ARTISANS

Burdick Chocolates
800/229-2419
www.burdickchocolate.com

One of the pioneers of American chocolate artisans. His mice are a must.

Donnelly Chocolates
888/685-1871
www.donnellychocolates.com

Unconventional flavors abound here, with the accent on herbs and spices. Also: vegan alternatives.

www.jacquestorres.com

Special for Valentine's: Champagne truffles made with Taittinger.

La Maison du Chocolat
800/988-5632
www.lamaisonduchocolat.com

BELGIAN-STYLE

House of Brussels
800/661-1524
www.brusselschocolates.com

Hedgehogs will change your life. Also, eiswein truffles.

Le Belge

888/532-3543
www.lebelgechocolate.com

Leonidas

800/900-2462
www.leonidas-chocolate.com

Imported from Belgium. Reasonably priced.

Martine's

212/705-2347
www.martineschocolates.com

Stylish molded chocolates, delicate creams, special holiday forms. The shop is located in Bloomingdale's New York store.



A sampling of special chocolates and packaging for Valentine's Day. Clockwise from top right: Martine's, La Dolce V, Richard Donnelly, Bridgewater Chocolates, Lunettes et Chocolat. At center, Fran's.

La Dolce V
707/829-2178
www.ladolcev.com

Special for Valentine's Day: the Aphrodite collection.

Markus Candinas Chocolates
800/845-1554
www.candinas.com

FRENCH AND FABULOUS

Payard Chocolates
800/877-9729
www.payard.com

Jacques Torres Chocolates
718/875-9772

Flown in from Paris several times a week.

Lunettes et Chocolat
866/925-8800

Designed by an artist, made by Jacques Torres.

Richart Design et Chocolat
888/742-4278
www.richart.com (click on USA)

Distinctive chocolates with silkscreen decoration. Collections include Petite Richart (an assortment of 20 flavors) or Ultra Thins (wafers of chocolate from different origins and cocoa intensities).

AND DON'T FORGET

Bridgewater Chocolates
800-888-8742
www.bridgewaterchocolate.com

Fran's
800/422-3726
www.franschocolates.com

Godiva
800/946-3482
www.godiva.com

Got Chocolate
www.gotchocolates.com

For Lindt, Perugina, Ferrero and other fine chocolates. ☺