

# GRAND TOUR

*Food*

## CHOCOLATE HEAVEN

By Gena Bell

CHOCOLATE IS ONE OF THE OLDEST CONFECTIONS known throughout history. After being discovered by Mexican civilizations during the last millennium B.C., chocolate was used mainly as a beverage. Spanish Conquistadors introduced chocolate beverages to Europe in the sixteenth century. Several European countries started incorporating chocolate into their desserts and cakes in the following century (thank heaven), but it wasn't until the nineteenth century that the chocolates and candies that we enjoy today were created.

Chocolate comes from a tree which produces flowers (large pods, or cacao) that contain 20-40 almond shaped beans. After the beans are harvested from the pods, they are piled on the ground, covered and allowed to ferment over several days to 120 degrees. Next, the beans are roasted and husked. These beans, or nibs as they are called, are crushed to become chocolate liquor or cocoa solids. Chocolate liquor is unsweetened chocolate, and this term is somewhat misleading as it contains no alcohol and only becomes liquid when heated. If you press chocolate liquor the liquid portion is cocoa butter and the remaining product is called the cake, better known as cocoa powder.

Today, there is great interest in eating products with a high percentage of cocoa solids. If you haven't already noticed, most packaging on more expensive chocolate specifies (in big bold letters) the percentage of cocoa to entice you to buy it. And lucky for us, dark chocolate has recently been identified as a great source of antioxidants, thus the additional hype.

For the rest of us, chocolate has always been a favorite sweet (or addiction for some). It can be appreciated all by itself or incorporated into a variety of heavenly desserts, cakes, sauces and confections. Chocolate molten cake—or some form of it, for example, is listed on most restaurant dessert menus due to the high demand. These little treasures are relatively easy to make and can be prepared ahead for dinner parties or special occasions. The key to molten cakes is to make the “molten” part first—heating semisweet chocolate and heavy cream together and then cooling. Next, scoop this hardened chocolate and form into a ball. Press the round chocolate ball into the center of the cake before baking. The cake portion is a mainly flourless chocolate cake batter which can be found in most cookbooks or on the internet. Delicious!

Bars, cookies and brownies are all chocolate concoctions that are well worth the effort. If you haven't made brownies from Barefoot Contessa, Ina Garten's cookbook, you absolutely don't know what you are missing! The trick to intense chocolate flavor

in baking is to minimize the flour and increase the variety of chocolates, using several different kinds of chocolate: unsweetened, semisweet, bittersweet chocolate chips, etc. The next time you bake cookies try using white chocolate chips and shaved semisweet chocolate from a bar—then notice the different layers of chocolate flavors and textures.

Now on to one of my favorite treats, ice cream. Have you ever made a real 1950s style chocolate soda? Well, now is the time...chilled tall glass, chocolate sauce, chocolate ice cream (chocolate chip if I am making it), and sparkling water. First, layer the sauce in the bottom of the glass and mix it with a splash of sparkling water. Next, add two large scoops of ice cream on top of the sauce and pour more sparkling water over the ice cream until bubbly and full. That's heaven! Note that chocolate sauce and hot fudge sauce are two great chocolate confections that are easy to make and can be stored in your refrigerator for long periods of time.

All in all, you can't go wrong with any kind of chocolate (as if you haven't already figured that out). Experiment and be creative. With Valentine's Day coming up...make something sweet for your honey.

### HOT FUDGE SAUCE

1 pound bittersweet chocolate

4 ounces corn syrup

$\frac{1}{4}$  cup simple syrup (equal parts sugar & water boiled and cooled)

1 cup heavy cream

1 tablespoon vanilla extract

### To Prepare:

1. Chop chocolate into small pieces.
2. Bring corn syrup, simple syrup and cream to a boil. Remove from heat.
3. Stir in chopped chocolate until completely melted.
4. Stir in vanilla. Serve over vanilla ice cream or use in sodas or other sundaes.

Can be stored in the refrigerator for up to 1 month. Enjoy! @T

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