

The Telegraph

February 11, 2014

Valentine's Day: why has chocolate won our hearts?

Love is in the air inside Unit 8 of the Powergate Business Park near Wormwood Scrubs in north-west London. Love in the form of chocolate powder, drifting from the top of a machine that produces the ultimate Valentine's Day gift: the chocolate truffle. The environment in the Prestat factory is sanitised, but the aromas – vats of molten chocolate, tinctures of exotic spices – are almost overpoweringly enticing. Nick Crean, who with his half-brother Bill Keeling owns the company, has toured the premises countless times yet the allure never fades. "Chocolate is, in its essence, romantic," he says.

Forget music – and bin those oysters. Chocolate is the true food of love, a delicacy that looks, smells and tastes delicious, contains a panoply of pleasure-inducing chemicals that arouse the senses without impairing potency or physical co-ordination, and which is forbidden enough to be enticing without having the Drug Squad round at your door.

Valentine's Day is the ultimate expressive opportunity for the chocolatier, a day when the gifts exchanged by lovers can be devoured with passion and ardour.

Quite right, says Pierre Marcolini, the Belgian chocolatier who recently opened a concession in Selfridges, featuring shiny scarlet chocolate hearts presented in mini handbags. "I have made a declaration of love that is edible in its entirety," says Marcolini. "I hope it will make the recipient feel special and cherished, that my creations will bring joy to whoever receives them..."

Nicolas Cloiseau is the artistic driving force behind La Maison du Chocolat, whose chic little shop on Piccadilly is an outpost of Parisian seduction. "With my creations, I like to think I seduce the gaze and the taste buds of those who enjoy them," he purrs. "The aim of each piece is to create a real moment of 'chocolate pleasure', provoking a voracious appetite that translates suppressed, compulsive desires into 'la gourmandise'."

Exotic foreigners, coming over here with their shiny chocolates to lure the innocent English into depravity – but we hardly need their help.

Amelia Rope, the British chocolatier whose Valentine's collection is on sale at The Conran Shop, is clear about the feelings she wants to evoke: "Decadence, a hint of naughtiness, a smattering of luxury and reward... a taste which ends with balance and satisfaction." Fellow London chocolatier Paul A Young has adventurous customers in mind. "If you buy the creative and unusual you are up for something new and daring," Young says. "This can inspire your love life."

So the mood of romance is established. But what is it about chocolate that identifies it so powerfully with desire? Adam Geileskey, the head of chocolate development at the smart Hotel Chocolat chain, is well placed to identify the ingredients.

“There are naturally occurring chemicals in chocolate that are good for you. The darker the chocolate, the higher it will be in substances associated with physical and emotional well-being,” Geileskey says. Theobromine is one such substance, found in larger quantities in chocolate than any other food – it’s a gentle stimulant, that as well as increasing blood flow also increases serotonin, the neurotransmitter associated with feelings of love and sexual pleasure. “I’ve heard it described as ‘a naturally occurring love drug’ and ‘a sexual sweetener’,” says Geileskey.

Another good thing is phenylethylamine, which stimulates the body to release endorphins (feel-good neurotransmitters), and also increases the activity of dopamine, the body’s reward chemical, combining to produce the kind of feeling that you get when you are in love. And the latest happy-making component to be traced in chocolate is anandamide, a cannabinoid whose name is derived – with good reason – from the Sanskrit for “bliss”.

One other easily proven scientific fact adds to chocolate’s appeal, particularly in a cold climate. Cocoa butter, naturally present in the pod and combined with ground cocoa nibs – and very little else – to produce good chocolate, melts at the internal temperature of the human body. Many foods are described as “melt-in-the-mouth”, but in the case of good chocolate it is literally true. It is not true, though, in the case of chocolate that is adulterated to make it cheaper, or sweeter, or suitable for a hot climate – or all three. Never pursue romance with cheap chocolate.

So fine chocolate looks good, smells good, tastes good, feels good in the mouth, and contains things which make you feel good.

That in itself should be enough to establish it as a desirable food. But a further, perhaps more powerful, aspect of chocolate’s appeal is psychological. Debra Zellner, Professor of psychology at Montclair State University in New Jersey, USA, has been leading research for many years into food cravings and the factors that influence how much we like particular foods.

Prof Zellner has concluded that the feel-good chemicals in chocolate are not in fact present in sufficient quantities to account for the pleasure we get from consuming it. Instead, she believes chocolate is desirable because it is nutritionally taboo, and consumption is pleurably transgressive, or in less academic terms, naughty but nice, and nice because naughty.

That feeds back into the ways in which chocolate is presented for consumption, in styles which become more straightforwardly sexual at Valentine’s Day. Geileskey notes that the colours used in packaging and decoration for Valentine’s chocolates feature red and pink prominently. “There is something primal about those colours,” he says.

Rope, a former perfumer whose chocolate bars are wrapped in delicate shades of shiny foil, and who has been known to further adorn them with spangly hearts on little knotted lengths of ribbon, says she likes to think of customers unwrapping her creations as “a kind of unravelling experience as they open them, to capture the senses of vision, taste and aroma”.

Notting Hill’s Artisan du Chocolat is even more straightforward, dressing its top-priced Valentine’s collection in a scarlet-ribboned corset: you don’t just unwrap these treats, you undress them.

Psychology also applies to the context in which chocolate is given. Nick Crean says when you give chocolate you are also giving comfort, and a fast track to warm childhood memories. Rope agrees, and cites a Prestat truffle as her formative chocolate experience. Geileskey, who will hand-make chocolates

in the Hotel Chocolat lab to take home to his wife on Valentine's Day, is looking forward to the romantic moment of handing them over.

“There is something very nice about creating something beautiful and then giving it to someone special,” he says. “Unravelling the layers of lovely wrapping to reveal these small, jewel-like objects, and when they are in the mouth, there is a sharp crack of the outer layer and these fabulous flavours flood out. It's like a game of pass the parcel, with only one winner.”

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