

An Introductory Guide to Chocolate Tasting

Ariel Segall

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Introduction

To most people, chocolate is a single flavour. There are good chocolates and less good chocolates, but the primary difference is in the cost and the fillings or flavourings. Just like wine, chocolate is the product of a multitude of complex factors, and the final flavour is affected by all of them. The cocoa plants, the fermentation process, roasting, conching, blending with other ingredients—all of these factors and more will affect the chocolate bar you eat.

Historically, the consumer has had little choice in chocolate, or insight into the possible variables. Over the last several years, however, the availability of specialty chocolates has been soaring. Chocolate bars that reveal their cocoa content are now frequent. Single origin chocolates, which are produced using beans from cocoa plants in a limited geographic area, are becoming common. We haven't yet been offered the chance to determine whether we prefer French or Italian roasts in our cocoa beans, but perhaps that day is coming.

What the Labels Mean

A note on labeling: Cacao and cocoa are often used interchangeably. Cacao is the name of the tree: cocoa is the name of the powder usually used in baking. At some point in the process of producing chocolate, the terms switch, but sources are not consistent as to exactly when. I've picked one processing point as the distinction, but be aware that you may see the other in literature or on your chocolate bars.

Some useful chocolate-related vocabulary:

Single-Origin: Chocolate made only from cacao beans grown in a particular region, usually a country.

Single-Varietal: Chocolate made only from cacao beans from a particular variety of cacao plant. Often used in conjunction with single-origin.

Percent Cocoa: The percent of the mass of a chocolate bar that originated in a cacao bean. This

includes both cocoa solids and cocoa butter.

Cocoa Liquor: Not alcoholic at all, cocoa liquor is what results when cocoa beans are ground after being fermented, dried, and then roasted. Cocoa liquor, commonly found in ingredients lists for chocolate bars, can also be further processed into cocoa butter and cocoa solids.

Cocoa Butter: The fat contained in a cacao bean, separated from the cocoa solids. It's added to cocoa liquor to create the classic chocolate texture. White chocolate is cocoa butter with sugar and dairy solids; the cocoa butter is the only thing 'chocolate' about it.

Cocoa Solids: The cocoa solids are what gives chocolate its characteristic flavour. Cocoa powder consists of cocoa solids with no cocoa butter whatsoever; it is sometimes additionally processed ("dutch" or "alkalized" cocoa) to remove bitterness.

How to Taste Chocolate

Vosges Chocolate, a high-end Chicago chocolatier specializing in exotic flavours, has this to say about how to eat one of their exotic candy bars:

See... Firstly, there should be a glossy shine to the chocolate bar, this shows a good temper; rather, a tight bond between the cocoa butter and the cocoa mass.

Smell... Rub your thumb on the chocolate to help release the aromas. Smell the exotic spices, florals, caramel notes and tropical fruits as they dance in the bouquet.

Snap... Quality chocolate should always be dry to the touch. Break the bar into two pieces. You should hear a crisp, ringing snap, which indicates a well-tempered bar of chocolate.

Taste... Place the chocolate on your tongue and press it to the roof of your mouth.

Within thirty seconds, the chocolate should slowly begin to melt around your tongue. The taste should not be evanescent, it should have a long lingering finish that is layered with spices, black fruits, earthy cacao, tree nuts, and whispers from the Aztecs.

You won't be able to easily follow all of their directions tonight, since we're only serving dark chocolate with no flavourings, and we've broken all of our chocolates into small tasting pieces to accommodate the crowd. Apply the rest of the directions here, and apply them all with your own chocolate. Don't just pop the chocolate in your mouth and chew. Look at it, and note the evenness of the color and texture at the edges. Smell it; not all chocolates will have a noticeable scent, but some do.

Most critically, let the chocolate melt slowly in your mouth. Taste the first, bold flavour as it hits your tongue. Wait for your mouth to distinguish subtle notes and overtones from the overall effect. Enjoy the long, dark, lingering aftertaste. And then write down your impressions so you remember it!

It's especially important to remember that you don't need a large piece of chocolate to enjoy the full depth of its flavour. In fact, it's often easier to properly taste the chocolate with a small piece, so that it melts quickly and you aren't tempted to chew. Try nibbling on larger pieces instead of eating them whole—you can always go back for more, and it's neater than the (apparently common in wine tasting) practice of spitting the remainder back out.

The Importance of Order in Tasting

Chocolate, despite its occasional use in savory dishes, is commonly categorized as a sweet. This is entirely reasonable—even bittersweet chocolate can be more than a third sugar by mass. Cheap commercial chocolate is often a lot closer to cheap commercial sugar with a chocolate flavour. When tasting chocolate, it is important to keep this in mind, and here's why:

Human beings are very, very good at tasting sugar—it's energy in an easy-to-use form. If you begin a tasting with a darker chocolate, and then switch to a less dark chocolate, the first thing you'll notice—and it will be overwhelming, compared to the other differences—will be the change in sugar content. Even small differences in sugar content will be noticeable, although very large differences in the underlying chocolate flavour can dominate very small sugar changes.

Decreasing the sugar content matters less, since the sugar flavour doesn't dominate that transition.

We've split our tasting tonight into three flights: one introducing a selection of single-plantation chocolates, showcasing the difference that the origin of the beans makes; one with a selection of chocolates at varying cocoa percentages; and one providing a selection of locally available chocolate brands. The first two flights are organized in order of increasing chocolate content; the last, which has less predictable variations, will be unordered. We'll have a break between flights to cleanse our palates.

How To Judge Quality

We're often asked what the 'best' chocolates are. The answer is simple: whatever you like. Wine magazines often will try to sell you on easy-to-read ratings, but just because something is highly rated doesn't mean you want it on your dinner table. Chocolate, being relatively cheap, is rarely used solely to impress other people. It's just there to be enjoyed. Therefore, we don't have to worry about arbitrary rating schemes or strict rankings. You're here to find out what *you* like in chocolate. Relax. Have fun. And enjoy yourself.

Today's Chocolates

Pre-Flight Chocolate

The dominant flavour in chocolates is, of course, chocolate. Unless you've already begun training your palate to distinguish between the subtle notes in different chocolates, the only thing you're liable to notice in our first sample will be that you're eating chocolate. Therefore, we'll start our tasting with something as close to generic chocolate as possible: Dove Dark. Don't feel obliged to eat an entire piece, since the only purpose of this sample is to give you a baseline to contrast the other chocolates with.

First Flight: Single Plantation Chocolates

Just like grapes or coffee beans, the environment in which the cocoa beans grow can profoundly affect the flavour of the final product. Because most chocolates are made with a blend of beans, however, many people are not aware of this fact. In the last few years, *single origin* chocolates have become more common. These chocolates are made using beans from a single region, usually a country. For tonight's tasting, we have something a little more special: chocolates made with beans from a single plantation.

Michel Cluizel *Maralumi*, from Papua New Guinea, 64% _____

Michel Cluizel *Mangaro*, from Madagascar, 65% _____

Michel Cluizel *Concepcion*, from Venezuela, 66% _____

Michel Cluizel *Los Ancones*, from Santo Domingo, 67% _____

Michel Cluizel *Tamarina*, from Sao Tome, 70% _____

Second Flight: Variations On A Theme

The amount of cocoa mass in a given piece of chocolate is one of the most obvious contributors to its flavour. For this section, we'll taste a selection of dark chocolates over a range of percentages, staying within a single brand as much as possible.

Valrhona *Le Noir* 56% _____

Valrhona *Caraibe* 66% _____

Valrhona *Guanaja*, 70% _____

Valrhona *Le Noir Amer*, 71% _____

Valrhona *Le Noir Extra Amer*, 85% _____

Michel Cluizel *Noir Infini*, 99% _____

Third Flight: Brands

For our broadest category tonight, we've assembled a wide selection of chocolate brands. Wherever possible, we've selected their 70% offering so that the difference between brands is highlighted. We chose 70% because it was the single most frequent percentage available across brands.

El Rey *Gran Saman* Dark Chocolate, 70% _____

Godiva Chocolatier Solid Dark Chocolate _____

Green and Black's Organic Dark 70% _____

Lindt Baking Bitter-sweet Chocolate 70% _____

Ghirardelli 60% Cocoa Bittersweet Chocolate Baking Bar _____

Lindt Excellence 70% _____

Dagoba Organic Chocolate Conacado 73% _____

Scharffen Berger 70% Bittersweet _____

Droste Pastilles Bittersweet Chocolate _____

Droste Pastilles Extra Dark Chocolate 72% _____

Trader Joe's Imported from Belgium 70% Pound Plus _____

Where to Find High-End Chocolate

- Whole Foods carries a wide selection of reasonably-priced chocolate bars, ranging from cheap organic bars to high-end brands such as Valrhona and Vosges. Selection varies from location to location; I've had a great deal of success at the Alewife branch. Make sure to check both the chocolate aisle and the chocolate section by the cheeses.
- Pemberton Farms, on Mass Ave between Porter and Arlington, has a selection that overlaps with Whole Foods, but differs on the high-end brands. They're the only source for Michel Cluizel's single plantation and 99% cocoa chocolates I've found in Boston so far. They also carry a wide variety of specialty milk chocolates, including some single-origin and single-plantation varieties, and high-end vegan chocolates.
- Cardullo's in Harvard Square has the best selection of imported and unusual chocolates in the area, but charges a premium for it. They carry many brands that are hard to find elsewhere, including a wide variety of Belgian, French, and Swiss chocolates. In general, it makes an excellent last stop on a chocolate shopping expedition; anything you can get for cheaper elsewhere you probably want to, but they'll fill in many holes.
- Trader Joe's, with locations around the Boston area, carries only a few name brand chocolates (Valrhona, Droste, Scharffen Berger, and Ghiradelli have all been spotted) and those erratically, but tends to have cheap prices and high-quality store brands.

If you're looking for specific brands, check online. Many of these chocolate manufacturers have websites with a broader selection of products than is available in local stores; in addition, there are online vendors specializing in fine chocolates who may offer cheaper prices than the individual manufacturers.

Tips for Running Your Own Tasting

If you've enjoyed this event, you may wish to run your own chocolate tasting in the future. Here are a handful of tips which you might want to use.

- If you're having a small event, or don't wish to spend a lot of time purchasing chocolate, look into pre-packaged tasting kits. Several high-end chocolate manufacturers now sell them, with variations. Michel Cluizel, for example, offers a single-plantation tasting kit, a cocoa percentage tasting kit, and a chocolate manufacturing stages tasting kit. Look for these online or in specialty stores.
- Keep your sample sizes small. Most people don't actually want as much chocolate at one sitting as they think they do, and will enjoy the tasting more if they aren't overwhelmed.
- Avoid serving milk with the chocolate. It may taste good, but dairy foods coat the tongue and reduce the ability of your guests to appreciate the subtle differences between chocolates.