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First lady of chocolate

ACCLAIMED CHOCOLATIER Chantal Coady not only owns Rococo, a chain of speciality chocolate shops in London, she is also the author of the best-selling *Real Chocolate* and initiated the Campaign for Real Chocolate in Britain. **Shiva Kumar Thekkepat** finds out what being chocolate's first lady means

Walking into Chantal Coady's Rococo chocolate shop on Marylebone Street in London is like stepping into a time machine; you tend to become the wide-eyed kid who daydreamed of chocolate houses and candy chairs. Rococo is a temple of delight. Sugar candy coloured walls, the heady aroma of dark chocolate, and chocolates in all shapes and sizes. Colourful bursts of flowers in bouquets turn out to be artfully made chocolates. The shop screams opulence.

But the renowned chocolatier herself is charmingly understated. She speaks in soft whispers, and almost appears shy except when she gets started on her favourite subject. Talking to Coady is not dissimilar to talking to a gourmet. Chocolate is spoken about in revered tones and before discussing her business, she insists on a tutored tasting which turns out to be an eye-opener.

She brings out a large wooden tray of the various flavours of chocolates she's blended and gives us small bite-sized pieces to taste.



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A bite of art

The mind-boggling variety of blends and the delicate flavours they contain can only be truly savoured if the palate is clear, she says gently as she pours out cups of white tea for us. A sip of the tea clears the palate after each sampling – and the flavours do stand out.

After that rather precise lesson a question arises: is chocolate making an art or a science?

"You cannot have one without the other," Coady smiles. "The science bit is precise and structured, can be taught, studied and analysed. Art is altogether more unpredictable. Although it's true that anyone who is good at art or design may have a natural talent, there is nothing that can replace lots of practice – just like music."

Coady turned to chocolate making while studying design. The turning point was a part-time job.

"I always was enamoured with chocolates as a child. While studying for my degree in fashion and textile design at Camberwell School of Art, I worked in Harrods' chocolate department; I needed the money and enjoyed the work very much," she says. "I also realised the style of selling at a large department store was not for me. I wanted to create a small intimate space, filled with all my childhood dreams of chocolate, that I believed would make my customers feel secure, happy and loved."

Coady's love for her work is palpable and her fervour contagious as she continues with her lessons on



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the intricacies of chocolate-making. "Chocolate making is divided into roughly three parts – the making of the couverture, which is choosing the beans, roasting, grinding and conching them – adding in vanilla, sugar or milk in the right quantities to create a balanced chocolate," she says. This process provides the raw material that most chocolatiers start with as their base.

Tempering chocolate is the next step which gives it the correct crystal structure that is essential to create a beautiful, shiny, crisp and stable chocolate. The third key skill is understanding how to make the perfect ganache or truffle – an essential to create silky smooth chocolate fillings.

Know the difference

There are of course different types of chocolates. Coady attempts to decipher the details for the layman. "We have dark, milk and white chocolate, but that is a very crude outline!"

"There are two main cocoa varieties – the Criollo – king of the beans, rare, fragile, fine flavoured and delicate; the Forastero, which is the basic bulk commodity traded on the world cocoa exchanges, and usually roasted very dark and mixed with lots of milk and sugar to make up for the lack of flavour and finesse. Then of course there are some very good natural and cultivated hybrids, the most famous being the Trinitario – it was supposed to have happened in a hurricane on Trinidad in the 18th century when two varieties

Facing page: Chocolates in various shapes and forms. Children will love these fruits and nuts! **Above left:** "The art with all chocolate is to get the right balance between the different flavour elements and the right texture in the mouth," says Chantal Coady. **Above:** Rococo Chocolates on Marylebone Street, London

cross-pollinated."

Some people argue that white chocolate is not really chocolate – it is made from cocoa butter (some companies might use other fats), milk and sugar with some vanilla to add flavour. Personally, I think it can be a great canvas to explore delicate flavour combinations – we make a particularly delicious white chocolate with cardamom that is one of our best-selling items."

Value addition

Coady always looks for value-addition. "I feel so strongly about the sustainability of cocoa farming globally that Rococo has a joint venture with a small chocolate company in Grenada, sharing a nine-acre organic cocoa farm, Grococo, that supplies cocoa beans to the Grenada Chocolate Company," she explains. "The model used here is revolutionary; it inverts the traditional one where the beans are sold as a commodity, shipped far away to be transformed into chocolate."

The Grenada model she works with has a group of small organic cocoa farmers who all bring their harvested

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beans to the carefully controlled fermentary where the beans develop their complex flavour profile before being dried, roasted and made into chocolate at a micro factory. The chocolate is then tempered, moulded into bars and wrapped on site, so that every bit of the value is being added on at the producer end of the story. "It's not easy, but it works and the chocolate is really spectacular," says Coady.

"We also use some of it in all our Rococo dark and milk organic chocolate bars and wafers."

The real deal at Rococo is of course the flavours Coady infuses into the chocolates. The process of arriving at the different flavours is not dissimilar to a musician composing a new symphony. "We have two distinct types of flavoured chocolates, the bar, and thin 'wafer' discs of chocolate that comprise our Artisan range; these are pure and simple made using organic chocolate," says Coady. "The art with all chocolate is to get the right balance between the different flavour elements and the right texture in the mouth."

Taking it forward

The Artisan range, she says, was developed about 20 years "when we first found some bars in Belgium being made by two young guys. They were also studying at a business school. After graduating, they decided to stop making chocolate and sold us the moulds. So we then took up the baton and started producing the bars from our small kitchen in Vauxhall. At first the flavours were mostly classical – like orange, ginger and almond, although there was also chilli and pink peppercorn."

Like all creations, some of the inspirations were a result of happy accidents. "We started to play around with the flavours. The sea salt which is our best seller was inspired by a walk along the beach in Cornwall, while licking an ice cream and getting some salt crystals mixed in by chance..."

"Many of the combinations come around like that. The unique tang of lime is a throwback to my childhood and my mother used to cook with them. I loved sour things and used to chew them, especially enjoying the sticky black bits which were the dried flesh. It reminded me of lime fruit pastilles, only super charged!"

"The ganaches are different as they are fresh and very seasonal. Made with cream and butter and fresh fruit purées,



Chocolatier Laurent Couchaux at work on one of his creations at Rococo. The garden in the background is part of the shop where customers can relax and enjoy Coady's creations

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we have a fantastic French chocolatier, Laurent Couchaux, who is a master at making them. The inspirations are the raw materials, and he will come up with ideas and together we fine-tune them until we get the result that we are happy with. For the summer there is an olive oil ganache with lemon and basil."

So, what should one look for in a good chocolate? "Freshness, authenticity, great raw materials of course, and ask lots of questions, don't accept twee stories without some real evidence!" comes the prompt reply.

Sweet society

Coady's love for chocolates even led her to pioneer a chocolate society. "I came up with the concept of the Chocolate Society – it was at a dinner with Alan and Nicola Porter (who were members of another society associated with a drink). It seemed a great idea and if you could do it for a drink, you should be able to do the same for chocolate, which at that time (around 1990) was very

poorly understood in the UK."

The objectives were to make people understand what real chocolate was, as opposed to the industrial sugar and trans-fat laden confections which were being passed off as chocolate by the confectionary industry globally.

"The Chocolate Society was started with Alan and Nicola, but after a year or so I left and concentrated on Rococo, which had been languishing in the absence of my full attention," she says. "What needs huge work is the real engagement with the growers to make it worth their while to farm cocoa – I heard an amazing fact last night: the average age of a cocoa farmer is 58. Young people have no ambition to toil away on the land in the hot sun, so unless we are prepared to pay the real price for cocoa, the future for chocolate eaters could be very bleak."

Coady is also the founder-member of the Academy of Chocolate in the UK.

Naturally, she is a great advocate of chocolates, championing the health

BISCOTTI – A VEGAN RECIPE

It can be daunting cooking for vegans. Often one thinks of tofu and seaweed and how joyless this kind of repertoire can be in the wrong hands. Vegan seems to imply sacrifice and self-denial. There are of course many luxurious ingredients which can be included in the vegan repertoire and often chocolate is overlooked, which is a shame. There should never be any dairy products or animal fats in pure dark chocolate, and as chocolate is so rich in vitamins and minerals, it ought to be an essential food supplement. This is an incredibly quick and simple Tuscan recipe.

Again halve all these. Enough for 60-70 biscuits.

Ingredients

500g 00 flour
200ml orange juice
150g mild but good quality extra virgin olive oil
200g castor sugar
200g real dark chocolate, chopped into pieces
80g fresh pine nuts, or walnuts
Salt, a pinch
7g dried yeast
Baking sheets, lined with greaseproof paper

Method

Preheat the oven to 180C. Mix all the dry ingredients in a bowl, except oil. Now add oil. When the mixture is ready spoon onto baking trays in walnut sized spoonfuls. Bake for 10 minutes.

THE AFFINITIES CAKE

"This was created for the 10th anniversary of Deutsche Bank and the Solomon R. Guggenheim's collaboration. Opposites attract, so they say. This cake is a triumph of disparate elements coming together. The result is unexpected, most delicious and as simple as anything to make. I think it is true to say that most of us love chocolate. For me it has always been a constant, unwavering friend when other elements in my life might not be so reliable. The cake is a volcanic reaction of olive oil, balsamic vinegar and baking soda. The "icing" is a ganache, the most temperamental of creations; an emulsion of liquid and chocolate. Technically difficult, but with a little guidance can be a truly pleasurable experience. A ganache is the foundation of all chocolate truffles and is a metaphor for successful relationships. It challenges us to find a way to create a perfect, harmonious union from two separate entities that do not have a natural affinity for one another. Sometimes it can go wrong, with the elements splitting apart. However, with patience the relationship can be healed," says Chantal Coady.

Ingredients

200g flour
200g golden castor sugar
100g ground almonds
75g Valrhona unsweetened non-alkalised cocoa powder
1 level tsp bicarbonate of soda (baking soda)
Salt, a pinch
1 tsp pure vanilla extract
400ml prune juice

6 tbsp olive oil
1 tbsp Balsamic vinegar
For the ganache:

170g dark chocolate, I use Valrhona Manjari
150 ml whipping cream

Method

Preheat oven to 150C. Oil a 20cm cake tin, approx 10cm deep. Line the bottom of the tin with some greaseproof paper. Do not use a spring fold tin with a loose bottom, or your mixture will leak out. Sift the dry ingredients into a bowl, then make 3 wells with a spoon. Put vanilla, vinegar and oil into the wells. Pour prune juice on top and mix well. The gentle volcanic reaction will start to happen, and bubbles will start to rise to the surface. Pour the batter into the cake tin and bake for 30-35 minutes, until a skewer comes out clean. It should still be moist. Cool for a couple of hours.

Ganache: Chop chocolate into crumbs in a food processor. Place in a heatproof glass bowl. Heat cream to boiling point in a pan and then pour it over the chocolate. Using a whisk, gently agitate the chocolate at the bottom of the bowl.

After a minute or so, you will see that the emulsion is starting to come together. Keep working the ganache until you have a perfect velvety mixture. (If for some reason the ganache splits, put it into the food processor and mix at a high speed for a couple of minutes or until the mixture is emulsified again.) Allow to cool at room temperature, and when the cake is cold, spread ganache on the top. The cake improves with being kept for a day.

STOLEN SARDINIAN CHOC TORT

This recipe comes from a famous restaurant in Sardinia, which shall remain un-named, as will the perpetrator of the deed! It is a seriously rich, dark moist cake made without flour or almonds.

Ingredients

200g real dark chocolate
120g unsalted butter
8 eggs, separated
170g castor sugar
30g unsweetened cocoa
1 tiny cup of very strong espresso coffee

Method

Melt chocolate in a very low oven 50C for about 5-10 minutes. Whisk egg whites with sugar to soft peak/meringue consistency. Add butter to the melted chocolate, stir in, then add egg yolks, cocoa powder and coffee. When it's all smooth and well mixed to a ganache consistency, fold in egg whites bit by bit, until amalgamated. Pour mixture into a 10-inch buttered springfold tin, and bake for 30 minutes at 160C or until knife comes out clean. Allow to cool in the tin.

EASY ROCOCO HOUSE TRUFFLES

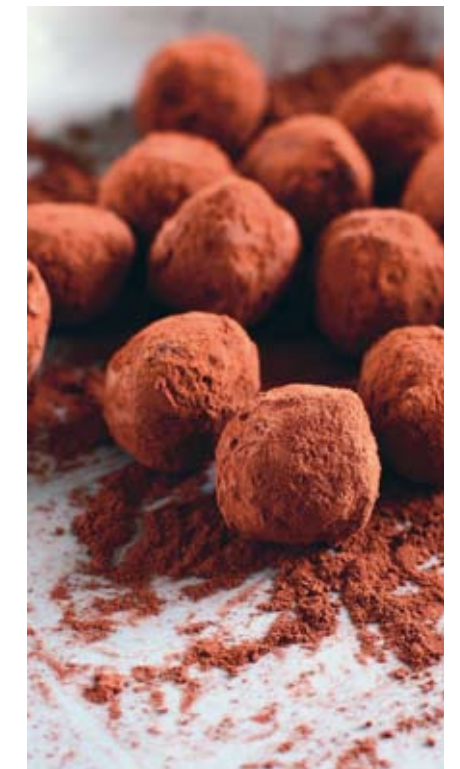
Ingredients (Makes 50)

300g Valrhona Manjari 64 per cent couverture, or Green & Blacks 70 per cent, chopped into chunks and then crumbled in a food processor
285ml whipping cream
75g unsalted butter
Unsweetened cocoa powder to dust, or chopped nuts

Method

Scald cream in a large milk pan, then pour slowly into the funnel of the food processor while running. You should then have a perfect smooth emulsified mixture. If by some chance it has "split", keep running the machine until the mixture binds together. Add softened chunks of butter and pulse until incorporated. Pour into a flat-bottomed dish and chill. When the mixture is firm (about 2-3 hours), scoop into balls with a melon-baller and drop into cocoa powder, sieve off excess cocoa powder and keep in a cool dry place. Consume within a week.

– All recipes courtesy Chantal Coady from her book, *Real Chocolate*



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Right and below right: Heavenly... Coady believes that dark chocolate is simply out of this world
Extreme right: Take your pick... a range of flavours to choose from



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benefits of chocolate over other desserts. “Chocolate is most definitely healthy, but it does need to be good chocolate, of course, and eaten in small quantities,” she advises. “Milk chocolate is not supposed to be easy to digest, as the milk bonds with the nutritious bit of the chocolate. Dark chocolate has much to recommend it – it’s packed full of vitamins, minerals and trace elements, naturally high in polyphenols and anti-oxidants, and you only have to research it to see all the scientific papers to prove this. Most commonly known are the beneficial effects on the cardiovascular and immune system, but also there is a marked effect on muscle and brain performance, both in stimulation and acting as an anti-depressant. Most doctors would recommend it in a similar way to aspirin. But remember, less is more.”

Coady’s grand obsession has also translated into books on chocolates. “I was asked to write my first book in the early 90s as there were very few books on chocolate at that time,” she says. “I concentrated on the history and my mother, who is a historian, spent months at the British Library researching the information.”

The next one was a guide to chocolates around the world, which was very successful, “but of course it went out of date very fast as it just captured a moment in time...”

Choco tales

“*Real Chocolate* was the book I really wanted to write, and I put everything I knew into it – it sold well and was reprinted in paperback, but is now out of print. I am happy to say that the process of learning is continual, so I am now working on my next book which will be a very practical hands-on manual of chocolate making.”

It goes without saying that Coady feels London is the chocolate capital. So, what about France?

“London is in my opinion the capital of chocolate; we have so many really talented chocolatiers whose

vivid imaginations allow them to go “off-piste” and create challenging combinations that make people think,” she insists. “For sure this will start to happen around the world, but for example, the French, who are masters of the art, are very conservative about what they will mix with chocolate. That is why our chocolatier Laurent Couchaux is so happy to be in London!”

Next on Coady’s agenda is pushing her brand overseas. “We recently won a competition ‘Walpole Brands of Tomorrow 2010’ – about pushing the company and the brand forward – so we are looking at the possibility of moving into new markets, certainly the Middle East, Far East and USA are all interesting ones. Exactly how we do this is still to be decided.”

– Shiva Kumar Thekkepat, *Feature Writer*, Friday

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