



FROM LEFT: CHOCOLATE CREATIONS FROM CAFE DECO, AMEDEI CHOCOLATE AT ISOLA, DIVINO'S ARRAY

# Is Chocolate the New Wine?

The new mark of class is to really know your chocolate

By Samantha Chau

It's no big deal to belly up to the wine bar and obsess over Bordeaux Chateau Laffite or a Cabernet-Sauvignon Napa Valley, or to choose Sumatra Iskandar or Kenya AA coffee at the market. But when it comes to chocolate, what is there besides bittersweet, semi-sweet, milk chocolate and white chocolate? Plenty.

"More and more upper-crust chocolatiers are getting picky about where chocolate comes from, what beans are used, what the percentage of cocoa is, and so on," says Susan Khoo, Manager of Fine Chocolate for Metadesign Limited, an Amedei Tuscany Chocolate distributor that supplies a number of restaurants and wine bars in Hong Kong.

Death by chocolate. Chocolate Decadence. Better-Than-Sex Chocolate Cake. The names of chocolate desserts say everything about the power this complex food has over our taste buds and our imaginations. Chocoholics are gradually shedding their candy bar tastes in favor of more up-market European-style chocolates, which are less sweet, fruitier and basically more "chocolaty". This should not come as a huge surprise; after all we've conquered just about every other culinary frontier. "Coffee has gotten better; so have wine, goat cheese and beer! Why not chocolate?" says Giacomo Pani, General Manager and Co-Owner of DiVino Wine Bar and Restaurant (G/F, 73 Wyndham Street, Central, 2167-8883).

For the real chocolate connoisseur, the appellations "dark chocolate" and "milk chocolate" seem as vague as "red wine" and "white wine." Chocolate aficionados are concerned with the geographic origin—much like the terroir concept of wine—because premium, unblended "single-origin" chocolates can exhibit distinctive and exciting characteristics that reflect something about where the cocoa beans they are made from were grown and processed. For example, Central and South American chocolates tend to be intensely fruity. West African chocolate, from places like Ghana, which goes primarily into mass-produced confections, is much less fruity and often has an earthy or smoky quality. And

Indonesian chocolate from Sumatra or Java is somewhere in between.

Much like wine production, high quality chocolate depends on a number of factors: the quality and degree of acidity of the beans, the proper fermentation, the manufacturer's proprietary blend of beans, and the roasting and refining process. And as with grape growing terroir, the focus is narrowing, with chocolates designated as being from specific regions within countries, and even single estates within regions. For example, Amedei Tuscany makes Chuao and Porcelana, two chocolates from two different regions in Venezuela, which is considered to be the world's premier country for growing cocoa beans. Both are delicious, yet they taste very different. Michel Cluizel's 1er Cru d'Hacienda Concepcion is one of these up and coming single-estate chocolates. Some single-estate chocolates, such as Valrhona's Gran Couva from Trinidad, are even vintage dated.

Restaurants and wine bars have also caught on to the upper crust chocolate phenomenon. At **Isola Bar and Grill** (level 3 & 4, IFC Mall, Central, 2383-8765), executive chef Gianni Caprioli uses Amedei chocolate for his *Timballo di cioccolato fondente caldo su crema vaniglia* - translation: Dark hot chocolate pudding with vanilla sauce. "I try and use only the best and in my opinion Amedei chocolate is one of the best. It is an almost cosmic and spiritual experience that is the perfect end to a meal."

**DiVino Wine Bar and Restaurant** has traditionally used Valrhona chocolate for their signature dessert, *Tris of Chocolate*, which consists of a chocolate liquid center flan, a chocolate brulee, and a scoop of chocolate ice cream. Now they are taking the chocolate exploration one step further: a new tasting trend with the introduction of its "wine and chocolate pairing" promotion. Till the end of October, customers can enjoy luxurious Italian chocolate from leading producer, Amedei, together with a number of superb Italian wines that bring out the best of the rich confectionery. Four (independent or as a package) pairings are available, with each Amedei chocolate being matched with the most suitable red wine from DiVino's acclaimed selection. According to Pani, "guests at our preliminary tasting were amazed by the fantastic flavors they experienced. They saw the extraordinary combination of

chocolate and wine taken together in a completely new light."

**Café des Artistes** (1/F, California Tower, 30-32 D'Aguilar Street, Central, 2526-3880) currently has a Valrhona chocolate menu where each dessert is made with a different kind of Valrhona chocolate. "We get more positive comments from this menu than I have ever heard on any other chocolate menu before," adds Martina Priadka, PR and Marketing director of Lan Kwai Fong Entertainments. "In restaurants where they use a lower grade chocolate, I think the guests notice but do not comment because they think it is just a bad dessert or bad chef and leave without saying anything."

"A good chocolate cake should have an intense, high quality chocolate flavor without too much sweetness. And the cake should also be light on its feet, even if it weighs a ton," says Jason Hyatt, group executive chef at Lan Kwai Fong Group. At **LUX Restaurant & Bar** (UG/F, California Tower, 30-32 D'Aguilar Street, Central, 2868-9538) his pure chocolate tart made with Scharffen Berger chocolate imported from the US, keeps the customers coming back, even though it weighs a pound a slice.

While all these chocolate desserts are miles apart in style, one thing they have in common is higher quality chocolate. Most of us were raised on the cheaper milk chocolate found in candy bars, but today chocolate manufacturers are providing a greater range of choices. High quality chocolate now comes in different strengths, based on higher or lower percentages of cocoa. "People are becoming more aware of high quality cocoa," says Khoo, "they come in and ask 'Is that 70 percent [cocoa]?' The higher the cocoa content, the lower the amount of sugar—70 percent and above can be so overpowering that even the most ardent chocoholic would find it hard to enjoy. It needs some sugar because as with wine, balance is the key to great chocolate."

Chocolate confectioners are popping up all over the place these days, much as boutique wineries did in the '90s. As with their winemaking brethren, the emphasis of this new wave of chocolatiers is on limited quantities made with high quality ingredients and a great deal of creativity. If you're looking for novelty, or if you just want to learn more about chocolate, you owe yourself a taste. These may not be single-vineyard wines, but they do open up exciting flavor possibilities for connoisseurs.