

CHOC AND AWE

Recession be damned. Posh chocolate sales have soared this Easter, and rightly so, says Lucy Cavendish

I am not sure when my love of luxurious chocolates began. Was it when, many years ago, a chef at a top London restaurant fed me a chocolate filled with chili? Or when obsessive British chocolatier Damian Allsop gave me a small but succulent wedge of water-based ganache filled with pear and anise? Was it when I was in Spain and I was served kid with chocolate sauce – a combination I had never even considered eating and yet, there I was, savouring mouthfuls of succulent meat in a bitter cocoa sauce.

Since then, chocolate has become a major part of my life. I am not talking Cadbury, here; I am not at the Ambassador's party, nibbling on a Ferrero Rocher. I am talking top-end, proper, real chocolate with 70 per cent-or-above cocoa solids that can skim the roof off your mouth and give you such a high it can become addictive.

It has, in many ways, become the new cheese. Where once I would hang out at cheese counters swooning at the thought of trying a small slice of creamy *fleur de chèvre* or a little taste of aged pecorino, now I have become an inveterate chocolate snob. I dream of eating a salty liquorice made by Allsop (whose chocolates were chosen to finish off the G20 dinner), maybe ordering a box of *tartufi* (small truffles filled with grappa, gianduja, hazelnut and rum) from Amadei of Tuscany; or of trying a sea-salt caramel, *framboise* truffle or apricot *pâté de fruit* mixed with a subtle wasabi ganache from William Curley's shop in Richmond. I wonder if I should pop into Paul A Young's boutique *chocolaterie* in Islington just to stare, open-mouthed in awe and delight, at the range of delicious handmade delicacies before me.

As a child, I never ventured much beyond a Yorkie bar or a Kit Kat. I thought a Turkish Delight was the height of sophistication. My mother would come home with a slab of Dairy Milk or Fruit and Nut and we'd all go into paroxysms of joy. I think of these days in horror.

Now I feast on such piquant luxuries as fresh English mint ganache by Allsop

available at my local market in Marlow, and bars of 70 per cent chocolate by Amadei. I scour food magazines such as *Olive* for the latest flavours (rose, for example, or Japanese black vinegar). I plan trips to London along my chocolate route, taking in Rococo in Marylebone, L'Artisan du Chocolat in Chelsea, and La Maison du Chocolat in Piccadilly.

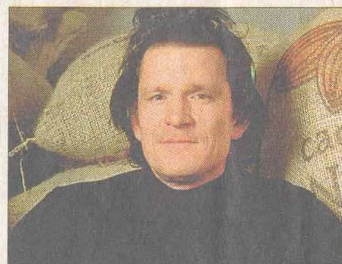
What surprises me is that I am obviously not alone in my addiction. Despite the prices they charge, these shops are heaving. The luxury chocolate market seems not to have been affected by the recession at all. In fact, quite the reverse: this Easter, you can get an Amadei egg from William Curley filled with caramelised Piedmont hazelnuts, almonds or orange-ttes for £25. Selfridges has an egg containing a Gold Bullion Britannia coin for £1,000, billing it as "the ultimate alternative investment for chocoholics".

Strong demand for upmarket Easter eggs at Waitrose – it has a range made with single-origin Costa Rican chocolate for £8.99 – boosted the supermarket's overall sales, which are up 5.8 per cent compared to this time last year; indeed, British chocolate sales, according to market researcher Nielsen, are up year-on-year more than 36 per cent.

So what has happened? How have we turned from a nation addicted to cheap chocolate into one that knows whether it wants its single-origin chocolate Venezuelan, Madagascan, Colombian or Caribbean?

"I think this enormous interest is part of a bigger national trend," says Ewan Benters, director of food and restaurants at Selfridges in London. "Twenty years ago, Britain began educating itself in wine, then coffee, and now chocolate. I think it shows that people are still spending, but more prudently – so they want more quality for their money."

Now we all know how to cook and eat properly, for which we have to thank Jamie, Nigella, Gordon, Hugh etc, we have turned our attention to proper chocolate. It's something we also seem



Taste of time: Willie Harcourt-Cooze, of Channel 4's 'Willie's Chocolate Revolution', has helped sales withstand the recession

to be rather good at. City boys who have lost their jobs have been overheard in one leading *chocolatier* enquiring about training in the ways of artisan chocolate.

But why has this industry not lost its way? It is, after all, hardly cheap to buy the Paul A Young signature Easter egg – decorated with 24-carat gold leaf, set on a large bar of etched chocolate, with an exclusive Kirt Holmes necklace inside. This retails at £95 and is limited to 50 eggs.

Young himself is ebullient about the chocolate market. "Chocolate sales are healthy due to one overriding fact: it makes us happy. Eating it and receiving it makes us smile," he



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says. This is from a man whose Marmite truffles and sweet basil ganache are flying off the shelves.

He has a point. Chocolate is sexy. It's not as expensive as a diamond bracelet and yet it is still considered a luxury. Even small champagne truffles wrapped in tissue paper in an exquisite box will cost no more than £20. It is an affordable treat and it beats the socks off a cheap egg with your name written on it. Our willingness to shell out a fiver on a few squares of good L'Artisan chocolate to lift the mood is what makes it recession-proof.

Also, as a nation, we are now far better informed about where our chocolate comes from and how it is made – something our European counterparts have known for an age.

Louise Thomas, manager of Notting Hill chocolate shop Melt, feels this is definitely one reason why, as a nation, we have fallen in love with posh chocolate. "I think people understand more about chocolate than they have done in the past, and they want much better quality now. Programmes like *Willie's Chocolate Revolution* on Channel 4 have helped."

David Kennedy, co-owner of Kennedys Fine Chocolate in Orton, Cumbria, promotes the health benefits of chocolate. "People are a lot better educated about good chocolate than they used to be, especially on its health benefits which may explain why it's still popular. And I don't think we've reached the stage where people are too hard up to buy birthday gifts or thank-you presents. It seems there's always a reason to eat chocolate."

He's right, of course, even if it's the best-selling handmade honeycomb "Credit Crunch" bites from The Chocolate Society. "We eat chocolate to reward ourselves," says its sales manager, Jane Auton. "Right now, we all need to do that."

As I open my William Curley Amadei egg today and relish the dark chocolate swirling round my mouth and crunch on the caramelised hazelnuts, I am inclined to agree.

