

Celebrate All Things Chocolate

If you are looking for an excuse to eat chocolate, look no further because today is National Chocolate Day. While many specific chocolate-related holidays are celebrated each year, National Chocolate Day is a time to celebrate everything chocolate. Chocolate is the favorite flavor across America, and it deserves a holiday. I am crazy about chocolate, and I know I am not alone!

Chocolate is made of cacao beans. Cacao beans are produced from the *Theobroma cacao* tree, which can produce around 2,500 beans. Cacao beans are grown in Mexico, Northern South America, and Central America.

It is believed that cacao beans were used as far back as 1100 BC. In their natural state, cacao seeds have a strong, bitter taste that must be fermented to develop the flavor. Once the beans have been fermented, they are then dried, cleaned, and roasted. After roasting, the shell is removed to produce cacao nibs. The nibs are ground and heated into a liquid known as cocoa liquor, which does not contain alcohol. The cocoa liquor cools into a cocoa paste. After sugar or cocoa butter are added to the cocoa paste, it will be considered chocolate but will still taste bitter.

If the cocoa powder is “Dutch-processed,” the chocolate liquor is treated with an alkaline solution before it is pressed. This makes the finished cocoa powder darker, mellower, and more flavorful. The extracted cocoa butter is saved and cooled into slabs for finishing other chocolate products. To make one pound of chocolate, over 400 cacao beans must be processed.

When categorizing chocolate, the three main types are milk chocolate, dark chocolate, and white chocolate. The darkness and flavor are determined by the proportion of cocoa powder to cocoa butter to sugar.

Generally, the classification of chocolate is based on these guidelines:

- Unsweetened baking chocolate – contains 100% cocoa powder and cocoa butter with no sugar added.
- Dark chocolate contains over 70% cacao. Bittersweet and semisweet chocolates are types of dark chocolate.
- Bittersweet chocolate contains 70% cacao and 30% sugar.
- Semisweet chocolate contains 60% cacao and 40% sugar
- Milk chocolate contains 10-40% cacao mixed with sugar and milk.
- White chocolate contains cocoa butter, sugar, and milk but no cacao.
- Cocoa powder contains 100% cacao and 0% sugar, and zero cocoa butter.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) standard states that for a food to be labeled as chocolate in the United States, it must contain at least 10 percent cacao liquor.

I like to keep a variety of chocolate on hand for baking and the occasional treat. It is best to store chocolate in a cool, dark place. Chocolate’s melting point, between 86 - 90°F, gives it a melty mouthfeel but should be considered when selecting a place to store chocolate. If the chocolate is stored in a warm place, some of the fats will come to the surface of the chocolate and create a

gray-white film on the surface. This is called “bloom.” If your chocolate has bloomed, you do not have to throw it away; it is still perfectly safe to eat even if it looks unappetizing. If you melt and re-cool the bloomed chocolate, the fats will mix back into the chocolate, and the bloom will not be visible in baked goods.

There’s some medical evidence to suggest regularly consuming dark chocolate might benefit cardiovascular health. Chocolate is best eaten in moderation because it contains sugars and fats and can be high in calories. Be sure to read nutritional labels to make the best choices.

If you’re in the mood for baking with chocolate, try these little cupcake-type snacks made with yogurt and real chocolate.

Chocolate Yogurt Snack Cakes- From David Lebovitz

<https://smittenkitchen.com/2009/06/chocolate-yogurt-snack-cakes/>

Makes: 12 cupcake-sized snack cakes

Ingredients:

7 ounces bittersweet or semisweet chocolate, coarsely chopped

1/2 cup vegetable oil, divided

1/2 cup plain, whole-milk yogurt

1 cup sugar

3 large eggs, at room temperature

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1/2 teaspoon almond extract

1 1/2 cups flour

1 1/2 teaspoons baking powder

1/2 teaspoon coarse salt

Paper cupcake liners

Instructions

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F. Line a 12-cup muffin tin with paper cupcake liners or lightly butter the pan.
2. In a heatproof bowl set over simmering water, melt the chocolate with 1/4 cup of the oil. Once melted and smooth, remove from the heat. (Alternately, you can do this in the microwave on high for 30 seconds, then in 15 second increments, stirring well between each until smooth.)
3. In another bowl, mix the remaining 1/4 cup oil with yogurt, sugar, eggs, and vanilla and almond extracts.
4. In a large bowl, whisk the flour, baking powder, and salt. Make a well in the center of the flour mixture and pour in the yogurt mixture. Stir lightly a couple times, then add the melted chocolate and stir until just smooth.
5. Divide the batter among the muffin cups and bake for 20 to 25 minutes or until they feel barely set in the middle and toothpick comes out clean.

6. Remove from the oven and cool on a wire rack before serving with coffee and a nice dollop of lightly sweetened whipped cream and any berries you might like.

Do ahead: These cakes can be stored in an airtight container at room temperature for four days.

(Sources: Fine Chocolate Industry Association (FCIA); www.finecooking.com; Food and Drug Administration; www.nationalgeographic.com)