

CHOCOLATE

"Blindfold your partner and feed them. Let them smell it first, then brush it across their lips and tease them with the taste."

-Katrina Markoff, Vosges Haut-Chocolat

The
Universal
Flavor of
Passion



Exotic Truffles from Vosges Haut-Chocolat boutiques in Chicago, New York, and Las Vegas

BY LYNN MORGAN

Have you seen *Chocolat*, Lasse Hallström's Oscar-nominated film from 2000? It stars Juliette Binoche and Johnny Depp, and tells the story of a woman named Vianne who arrives in a tiny, tradition-bound French village in the 1950s and opens a fanciful chocolate shop in the middle of Lent, the wintry season of reflection and self-denial that precedes Easter in the Catholic Church. Her bohemian lifestyle horrifies many in the staid little village but her chocolates, infused with exotic flavors, surprising spices, and herbal remedies, entice, bewitch, and thrill all who dare to taste them.

"It melts so slowly on your tongue," confesses one besotted customer, "and it tortures you with pleasure."

A quick online search revealed chocolate to be the world's favorite flavor. The French, English, Swiss, and Italians all consume even more of it per person each year than do the Americans.

Chocolate's origins are international and ancient. Cacao, the bean from which chocolate is derived, is grown in the tropics, in Costa Rica, Guatemala, Ecuador, and the Dominican Republic. It was held sacred by the Mayans and the Aztecs who believed it had magical powers to bestow wisdom and vitality.

Explorers and conquistadors brought the exotic treat back to Europe where it found its way into the court at Versailles, the palace in Vienna, and anyplace where the wealthy and indulgent lounged. The infamous 18th century libertine, Casanova, extolled its effectiveness as an aphrodisiac in his notorious memoirs: He sipped it in preparation for his many, many dalliances.

Science, which frequently takes a distressingly reductive perspective on some of life's loveliest mysteries, tries to reduce chocolate's appeal to a matter of mere chemistry. There are over 300



Hasty Khoei Torres, Madame Chocolat

compounds in chocolate, many of which have known psychoactive effects. Caffeine, of course, increases alertness, and one of chocolate's amino acids is well known for its sedative effects and for enhanced serotonin, a substance that decreases anxiety. Dark chocolate contains flavanols, similar to those in red wine, which may decrease "bad" cholesterol and enhance heart health. And all chocolate contains phenylethylamine (PEA), which induces mild euphoria, giddiness, and a sense of contentment and well-being.

It's kind of like falling in love. Literally: Chocolate triggers many of the same responses in the brain and body as romantic infatuation.

SWEET SURPRISES

Salon City recently met two real-life Viannes, gorgeous women and entrepreneurs who are making the whole world fall in love with their chocolates.

Behind the purple doors of the Vosges Haut-Chocolat boutiques in Chicago, New York, and Las Vegas you will find some of the most exotic chocolates in the world: Truffles made from 85%

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cacao, dark and pure, blended with surprising, even shocking ingredients; the Naga is concocted from deep milk chocolate and coconut, dusted with Indian curry powder; the Black Pearl tastes of wasabi and ginger with black sesame seeds sprinkled on top; the Absinthe is infused with Chinese star anise, fennel, and pastis, the tastes of the notorious green liqueur that Oscar Wilde adored and that guided Van Gogh along the path to madness.

The woman behind these inspired confections is Katrina Markoff, a graduate of Le Cordon Bleu in Paris where she trained in all the traditional techniques and secrets of the greatest French chefs.

It was there that a close encounter with an expertly prepared beignet au chocolat changed her life.

"I bit into this gorgeous, hot and sweet, weightless pillow of dough, and hot, molten chocolate exploded in my mouth," Markoff recalls. "I changed immediately from being a vanilla girl to being a chocolate girl in that instant."

It launched her on a journey of discovery that has taken her all around the world, guided by her intellectual curiosity about cultures and her passion for food, especially chocolate. After graduation, Markoff wandered from Paris to Spain and Italy, working in restaurants and studying the local cuisine. Leaving Europe, she traveled to Thailand, Korea, China, Vietnam, Singapore, and Australia, tasting as she went. "Cultures speak to me through their food," she explains.

UNCOMMON COMBOS

She opened Vosges Haut-Chocolat (www.vosgeschocolate.com) in 1998 in Chicago, a city with a long history of candy making. Markoff is a long way from Willy Wonka, though. While her chocolates are not exactly NC-17, they are definitely not for the kiddies. The flavors can be intimidating. Consider the Budapest truffle, sprinkled with bright red Hungarian paprika; the Oaxaca, 75% dark African chocolate, its center infused with guajillo and pasilla chiles, topped with bits of pumpkin seeds;

and her now famous Mo's Bacon Bar, an exotic candy bar combining milk chocolate with alderwood smoked salt and applewood smoked bacon.

Markoff fearlessly adds Australian lemon myrtle, lavender, and vanilla to white chocolate to create "bianca" hot chocolate, and tops a milk chocolate bon bon with a sugary, candied violet. A box of her assorted truffles is a magical mystery tour of the world's spice roads, art, literature, cultures, and even spirituality, all interpreted in chocolate nirvana.

One of her earliest triumphs came in 2001 when she collaborated with a friend, Alexis Swanson Traina of the Swanson Vineyards (one of the most celebrated wineries in Napa), to create a special treat to be served in the winery's opulent tasting salon. Markoff added the Swanson vineyard's famed red wine, "Alexis," to a creamy chocolate ganache, and topped it with a bold combination of spices like anise and curry, thus making the dark truffle the perfect companion to the lush berry and currant notes in the wine. "The idea of combing wine with chocolate was very radical back then," she recalls, but she and Traina were convinced it would work. And it has, fitting perfectly with the atmosphere of decadent pleasure Traina wanted to create in her wine salon. "The naughty combination of dark chocolate and red wine has really been a favorite," says Traina. "I think every woman loves the image of lounging about the boudoir, reclined on a day bed, popping chocolates as she prims for her night."

"Chocolate is sexy because anything you do with your mouth is very sensual," says Markoff. "It's a magical food. Cocoa butter melts at body temperature. It changes from a solid to a liquid in your mouth from the contact with your skin. It's always been provocative. Some people consider it an aphrodisiac, and in 18th century Spain it was banned by the Catholic Church. They thought it was too stimulating, too erotic."

Markoff continues to dream up chocolates that inspire passion. She recommends sharing her inventions with someone you adore: "Eat it on the floor, surrounded by candles," she suggests. "Blindfold your partner and feed them. Let them smell it first, then brush it across their lips and tease them with the taste."



Bon bons are better in threes





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found myself sitting in my office in a Century City high rise, looking out the window and wondering, 'Is this really what I want to do with my life?'"

She found the answer in her desk drawer. "I reached into my chocolate stash and realized that chocolate is really what I love the most." She left high finance for haute cuisine and enrolled in culinary school in Pasadena.

While watching the Food Network, Torres became fascinated with "Mr. Chocolate" himself, acclaimed chef and chocolate artiste, Jacques Torres. "It was magical," she recalls. "The things he could do and create! He's a master chocolatier." Soon she was in New York to apprentice with the wizard of chocolate.

MADE WITH LOVE

If Katrina Markoff is the mad scientist of chocolate, Hasty Khoei Torres is the Coco Chanel. In her Beverly Hills boutique, Madame Chocolat (www.madame-chocolat.com), Torres is introducing the venerable traditions of French artisanal chocolates to a new generation.

Steps away from Spago and the glamour of Rodeo Drive, Madame Chocolat is a beautifully detailed jewel box of a shop, filled with light from a custom-designed crystal chandelier reflected in a huge, gilt-framed mirror. It's chic and very romantic, the perfect background for Torres' delicious creations. Best of all, Madame Chocolat features an open kitchen, allowing customers to watch as each tiny bon bon is crafted before their eyes. It's couture chocolate.

"We don't have any machines," Torres explains. "Each piece is handmade, hand molded, and individually decorated. It's not a factory. It's painstaking but I enjoy it thoroughly."

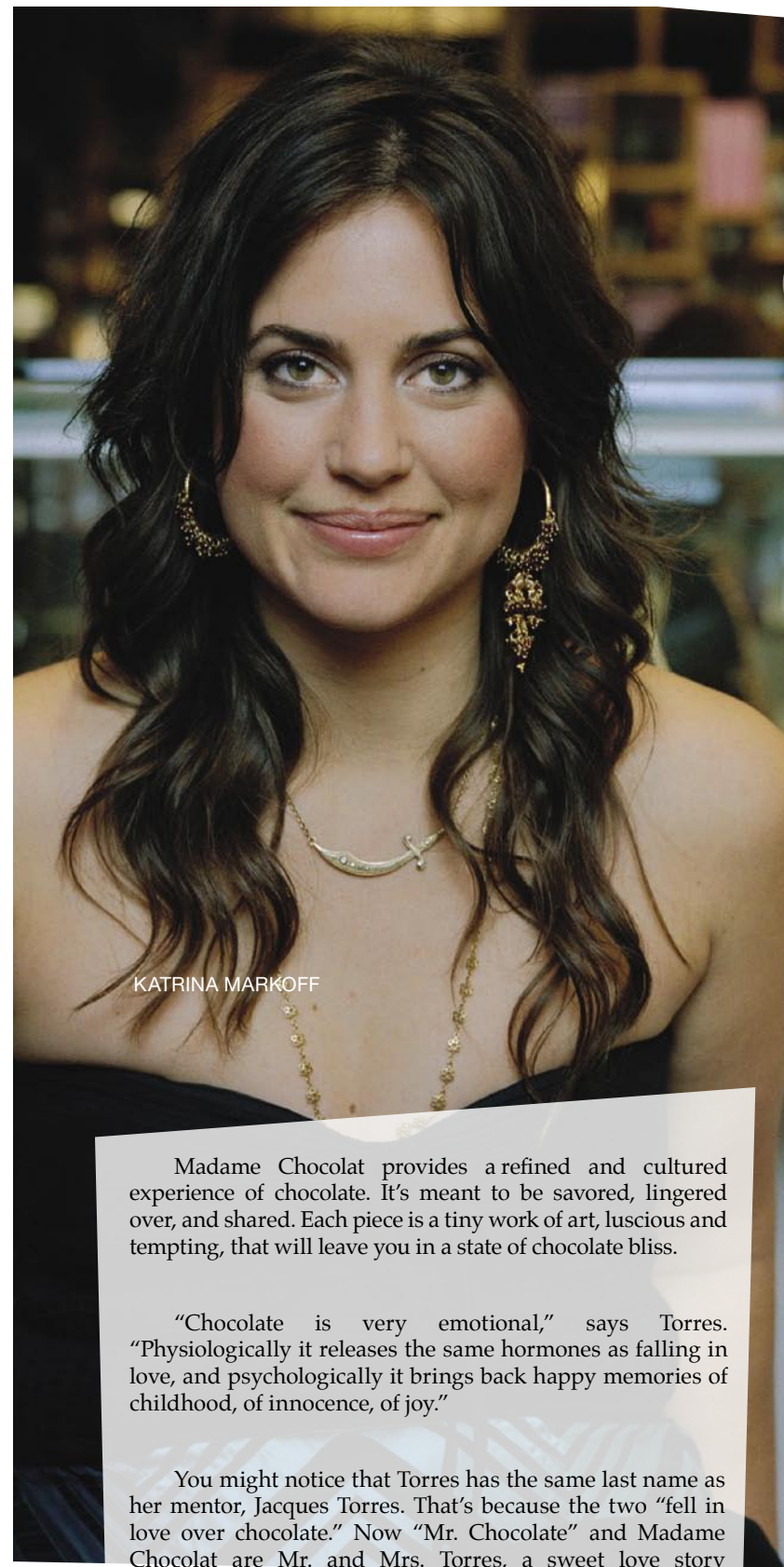
Torres has always been mad about chocolate. "As a kid I always had a candy bar in my backpack," she laughs. But it is only recently that it has become her career. "I went to business school at USC," she explains. "I got a degree and went into finance and I was very successful at it, but I

VIVA LA CHOCOLATE!

Torres returned to her native Los Angeles and spent 11 months transforming office space into a salon du chocolat. Open for just a year, Madame Chocolat has become a destination for chocolate lovers who swoon over Torres' luscious French-inspired treats. She works with Belgian chocolate, high in cacao, rich and satisfying, and uses it to create bon bons in the classic French style with her own high-spirited flair.

When you bite into her "Ooh La La," the sweet exoticism of passion fruit infused with Alize explodes in your mouth. "C'est la Vie" mixes Grand Marnier liqueur with milk or dark chocolate. And "Mendiant" combines the Mediterranean flavors of roasted almonds and pistachios with dried apricots in white, milk or dark chocolate. Torres has even created special bon bons in honor of her family. "Monsieur" puts a playful spin on her brother's love of scotch by infusing dark chocolate ganache with ultra-luxe Johnny Walker Blue. "Le Papa," a tribute to her father, features Courvoisier cognac and "La Maman," a tribute to her mother, who designed and decorated the boutique, is a pure chocolate truffle dusted with cocoa powder.

Torres uses only the finest ingredients and each piece is tiny and exquisite, not overwhelming. "It's quality over quantity," she insists. "Because I use chocolate with a high percentage of cacao, fresh cream, and high-fat butter each piece is very rich, and that's why I make them very small. You don't have to eat a lot to feel completely satisfied."



KATRINA MARKOFF

Madame Chocolat provides a refined and cultured experience of chocolate. It's meant to be savored, lingered over, and shared. Each piece is a tiny work of art, luscious and tempting, that will leave you in a state of chocolate bliss.

"Chocolate is very emotional," says Torres. "Physiologically it releases the same hormones as falling in love, and psychologically it brings back happy memories of childhood, of innocence, of joy."

You might notice that Torres has the same last name as her mentor, Jacques Torres. That's because the two "fell in love over chocolate." Now "Mr. Chocolate" and Madame Chocolat are Mr. and Mrs. Torres, a sweet love story indeed. Torres consulted her husband when asked what makes chocolate so sexy and the chocolate maestro replied succinctly: "It's spreadable and lickable!"

Indulge with someone you love. ■

Lynn Morgan lives in Los Angeles and writes about art, style and design. Her first book, Modern to Classic: Residential Estates by Landry Design Group was just published by ORO Editions. She is mad for jewelry and chocolate, and is scared to go to Miami.

The Secret World of CHOCOLATE

The US leads the world **chocolate consumption.**

The cocoa press was invented by Dutch chocolate master C. J. Van Houten to **squeeze cocoa butter from the beans.**

Africa is now the world's leading producer of **cacao.**

The **first chocolate box** was introduced by Cadbury.

The word "chocolate" is derived from the Aztec word "xocolatl," which means **"bitter water."**

The **only state in the US** that grows cacao beans for producing chocolate is Hawaii.

The **Chocolate Show** is an annual festival of world class exhibitors, **chocolate taste testing**, chef demonstrations, scrumptious sweet treats, and even **chocolate fashion!** You've heard of edible underwear? How about deliciously decadent haute **chocolate dresses?** Now that's making a fashion statement...! www.chocolateshow.com

The **blood in the famous 45-second shower scene of Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho** was actually **chocolate syrup.**