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## Exquisite handmade treats, pastries and espresso at Chi Chocolate

by [LUCIA VITI](#)

02.11.18 - 09:19 am



According to the National Retail Federation, Americans spend \$18.2 billion on Valentine's Day gifts. Jewelry tops the cha-ching list at \$4 billion, flowers fall second at \$2 billion with candies and chocolate trailing third at \$1.7 billion. As mass production trumps taste, a "chocolate revolution" is on the rise. Artisan chocolates now earmark the market for quality.



San Diegans in search of exquisite chocolates need to look no further than Chi Chocolate at Liberty Station. The artisan chocolate shop, owned by Tess and Jesse Brown, offer a decadent selection of luxurious chocolates, handmade treats, pastries and fine Spanish red wines within its artistically designed espresso bar and café.

A myriad of exotic and classic chocolates appear among a potpourri of cocoa chips, chocolate pearls, humongous chocolate cookies,

homemade granola, biscotti, assorted pastries and Calabria Coffee Beans.

Preservative free and jampacked with heart-healthy antioxidants, Chi Chocolate's exclusive collection includes assorted truffles, Bon-bons, succulent enrobed chocolate fruit bars, plus a wide selection of chunky slabs of premium chocolates. Other treats include chocolate ganache truffles topped with Hawaiian sea salt and spicy sweet chili tangerine bonbons infused with Pasilla peppers. Valentine's Day specials include custom made, multi-sized, chocolate heart boxes filled with requested candies. Box can be eaten or melted for hot chocolate.

Celebrating more than 10 years at Liberty Station, the New York jet-setters purchased the business from its previous owners who resold mass market chocolates. The Browns would have "none of that," so despite knowing nothing about making chocolate, they dove in. Their diligence paid off. Chi Chocolate remains a must-do pit stop for tourists and locals in need of a "chocolate fix."

"We took it upon ourselves to learn how to make chocolate," said Tess Brown. "We researched and experimented so that little by little we replaced all purchased chocolates. We learned the good and bad of everything chocolate, learning more good than bad."

The Browns purchased grade-A chocolate in bulk from Callebaut (Belgian

chocolate) and Valrhona (French chocolate), “chocolate that passed our taste test,” and mixed various extracts, herbs, spices, liquors and fruits until pieces were “perfectly homemade with no shortcuts.” Brown admits that the learning everything about chocolate was both surprising and fun. Each tested their favorite flavors

“Chocolate enhances the added flavors,” she continued. “We played with our favorite flavors until the taste balanced well on the palate.”

Green cardamom is touted as one of their most surprising gems.

“We paired green cardamom, a spice from the ginger family, with dark chocolate,” she said. “The chocolate’s smokey flavor pairs well with the herbaceous spice.”

Brown listed popular “no brainer” flavors that include caramel, raspberry and strawberry among the daily 16-20 flavored offerings. Rose Water, Champagne, Maple Bacon, Amaretto and Toasted Almond are among the unique treats. The Browns make everything in small batches to ensure freshness. Custom molds, truffles and pieces are also available, as long as “it’s not too crazy.”

Brown likened the craft of making chocolate to “a woman.”

“Chocolate’s temperamental,” she said. “I describe chocolate to be like a woman. Sometimes it sets and sometimes it doesn’t.”

Brown explained the chocolate-making process as sometimes tenuous. Affected by weather – rain, heat and humidity – chocolate has its moments when compounds don’t break down properly or excess moisture stalls the setting process.

“We temper our chocolates,” explained Brown. “We do everything with patience and TLC. But it’s important to us and our customers. A little chocolate taste – premium chocolate – goes a long way.”

Chi Chocolate shop’s popularity has grown by its taste testers. The Browns offer chocolate catering for parties, weddings and showers. Although the Browns never imagined they would become chocolatiers, they admit “we’ve developed a knack for the craft.”

The shop’s chocolate beverages are all made with Chi’s Chocolate. The Espresso Bar and Café also offers Vietnamese, American and Italian coffees, Mexican mocha, as well as spiced hot chocolates, Chi Chai teas and flavored teas. Syrup options include hazelnut, vanilla, raspberry, cinnamon, English toffee, almond, coconut, sugar-free vanilla and sugar free hazelnut. Cold drinks are also available.

When asked about the shop’s name, Brown concluded, “Chi means energy and that’s what chocolate gives you!”

## CHOCOLATE FUN FACTS

Chocolate’s 4,000-year history dates back to 1900 BC in the enclaves of Mesoamerica’s tropical rain forests. The Olmec, Mayan and Aztec civilizations

fermented, roasted and ground cacao beans into a paste that was brewed with water, vanilla, honey, chili peppers, spices and pureed corn. Thought to invigorate libido and mood, the bitter liquid was believed to possess spiritual and magical qualities.

The Mayans worshiped a god of “cacao” while reserving the dark substance for rulers, warriors, priests and nobles. Referred to as “food of the gods,” the Aztecs believed that cocoa bean seeds were gifted by Quetzalcoatl, the god of wisdom. Legend suggest that Montezuma, the Aztec king, drank three gallons of the black-brown liquid daily to increase his libido.

Once America was discovered, the Europeans transported the native cuisine to Europe, in some cases in lieu of silver and gold. History notes that Montezuma honored Hernán Cortés with a chocolate drink, assuming the conquistador to be a reincarnated deity. The bitter liquid didn’t become popular in Spain until honey and sugar cane was added. Thought to have medicinal and nutritional properties, chocolate then became a status symbol, ingested by royals and elites. Cassanova was noted to love the product as an aphrodisiac.

Spain coveted the treasured treat until the royal marriage between Anne of Austria – a Spanish Princess – to King Louis XIII of France. France welcomed both the princess and the savory treat.

In 1828, Coenraad Johannes van Houten, a Dutch chemist, invented the cocoa press. The machine squeezed fatty cocoa butter from the chocolate liquid, leaving a dry cake that was pulverized into a fine powder. Alkaline salts were added to reduce its bitterness. Known as “Dutch cocoa,” the powder was mixed with liquids and other ingredients and poured into molds. Now solid, the reduction of production costs made chocolate affordable to all.

In 1847, J.S. Fry & Sons introduced the first chocolate bar. By 1868, an English company called Cadbury marketed boxed chocolates. Several years later, Nestle introduced milk chocolate. In 1879, Rodolphe Lindt invented a Conch Machine, a grinding machine that churned chocolate into a velvet texture. The Conch Machine also afforded production on factory assembly lines. Mars and Hershey appeared in the late 18th early 19th Centuries.

Chocolate was so valued during America’s Revolutionary War, it was included in military rations and often used in lieu of wages. Today, Americans consumes, on average, 12 pounds of chocolate every year. Worldwide consumption cashes in at \$75 billion annually.

Chocolate is made from the cocoa pod, the fruit of the cocoa tree. The pods are filled with seeds covered with creamy white fruit pulp. Historically, the pulp was removed and fermented as a drink under banana leaves or burlap tarps. Seeds, now referred to as cocoa beans, are dried in the sun and roasted. Cooked and cracked, the nibs are removed and used to make chocolate.

Chi Chocolate

Where: 2690 Historic Decatur Road.

Hours: Closed Monday, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tuesdays–Fridays, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturdays–Sundays.

Info: 619-546-0650.

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