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Dainty stenciled chocolates at Romanicos.

food of the gods WHO NEEDS CUPID'S ARROW WHEN YOU HAVE CHOCOLATE?

It doesn't have to be Valentine's Day to indulge, but Cupid definitely gives us a good reason to turn into discriminating chocoholics. The best place to begin is with small-batch indie chocolatiers.

On the edge of Coral Gables sits **Romanicos Chocolate** (romanicoschocolate.com). Fashioned after an elegant South American chocolate shop, the tiny store displays its confections in polished dark-wood cases, and patrons sip espresso at two petite tables. In the kitchen, Venezuelan-born Alejandra Bigai tops her pretty bonbons with fish and flower patterns, but it's her dark truffles we found to be most

intoxicating. A bite reveals a sinfully intense bittersweet center. Bigai doesn't use butter or sugar, so each piece projects the flavor of pure chocolate — with only 38 calories. Box of 12 truffles: \$36.

In **St. Augustine**, French chocolate maker Claude Franques of **Claude's Chocolate** (claudeschocolate.com) encourages his customers to take small, savoring bites — never pop the entire bonbon in your mouth — and let it slowly melt. Lace curtains frame the windows of his dollhouse-size shop. The chocolate to try here is the heart-shaped milk-chocolate ganache mixed with passion-fruit puree and

Alize liqueur (a blending of cognac and passion fruit). The pairing of the fruit's tart-sweet taste with the milder milk chocolate is heavenly. Box of 12 chocolates: \$14.50.

When it comes to impressing your valentine, the shiny, color-swirled chocolates from **Norman Love Confections** (normanloveconfections.com) in **Fort Myers** will make her ooh and ahh. American artisanal chocolatier Love creates heart and faceted-diamond shapes. In his contemporary chocolate salon, you'll find silky whites with surprising flavors like Granny Smith apple and New York cheesecake. Box of 10 chocolates: \$22. — PL