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Top Artisan Chocolates for Gift Giving

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Let's be honest, all chocolate is good, but the true artisans make chocolate that transcends good—taking us into the realm of speechless. The chocolates featured in this story were tasted, debated over, and tasted again. If they delivered on impact, richness and the element of surprise, they made the cut. One final note, almost every chocolatier made a spicy chocolate offering—and only one, Chuao, pulled it off in a delicate, surprising (not punishing) way. Heat in a chocolate truffle can border on cruel sometimes. It was also nice to see that bacon and chocolate have parted ways—as we did not receive any pork-inspired truffles this year. Otherwise, it was a very nice showing. Happy indulging.

All-Around Favorite: [Chocolopolis](#): The defining difference between these chocolates and others we tasted was the utterly complex and rich ganache inside each different truffle. Chocolopolis has one of the largest collections of craft chocolate bars in the world—many of which they incorporate into their truffles. The Champions Box (my favorite) features all of their award-winning truffles. Lacquered and glossy, each truffle delivers serious taste, (think lemon-lavender white chocolate or the Madagascar dark chocolate). The top taste was the Dominican Republic House Blend truffle, made from their proprietary blend of select Dominican Republic couvertures (cacao). Chocolopolis founder Lauren Adler notes, “I’d compare our style of confections to the French tradition, where it’s really about the quality and the flavor of the chocolate.” Her caramel cups dusted with a cluster of sea salt are worth a bite too.

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Cacao Art: Made by sisters Susana and Isabel Garcia, who started the business in Venezuela but later moved to Miami (lucky for us). Says Isabel, “We think, as sisters, there is a lot of nostalgia in our chocolates, because we like to recreate the tastes of our shared childhood in Venezuela.” Case in point, the decadent Anís y Papelón truffle (an International Chocolate Awards winner) made from sweet anise and raw cane sugar and inspired by a traditional Venezuelan pastry. The sisters use as many local and organic ingredients as possible and different spices and flavors from their extensive travels in Europe and North and South America.

Chua Chocolate: (pronounced chew-wow) This company specializes in textural surprise. The whiz kid behind the firecracker truffle (chipotle caramel fudge with sea salt and popping candy) likes to thread in a secret layer of heat that doesn’t hit until the finish so you get the full-on rich chocolaty pleasure with a spank of fun at the end. The other favorite in this tasting was the Salted Chocolate Crunch with toasted panko breadcrumbs, olive oil ganache and a dusting of sea salt—a truly devilish bit. Owners (and brothers) Michael and Richard Antonorsi. also hail from Venezuela.

Marti Chocolatt: Chocolatier Tonet Tibay was inspired to combine her Philippine heritage with the finesse and sophistication of the French way of making chocolates and confectionery. Her surprising and unexpectedly delightful combinations are at the heart of her chocolates—consider the Kalamansi (zesty Phillipine lime and dark chocolate) is a piquant surprise with a decadent core. We also loved the silky Buko Pandan (a major award-winner) with young coconut bits with pandan leaf infusion in milk chocolate. Marti Chocolatt was awarded Best Chocolatier in America in 2012 and 2013 by International Chocolate Salon.

Norman Love Confections: Chef Norman Love’s chocolates always have a tropical high toned fruitiness to them—even his dark selections. We loved his holiday candy cane selection (which comes in a fetching candy cane-shaped box.) The sleek, lustrous very colorful chocolates won big for shock and awe—they also tasted great too. This was one of the most festive and fun collections that we opened.

La Chatelaine Chocolat Co: Located in, of all places, Bozeman Montana, owners JP Wlady Grochowski and Shannon Hughes Grochowski are most inspired by nature. Says Shannon, “We



walk through a small forest each day to work, and feel inspired each time, whether it's the color of the leaves, deep green of the spruces or the scent of sage, or the local snow-capped Bridger Mountains. We also find a lot of inspiration in France, where we spend each summer with our children and Wlady's maman and cousins." Top taste was the Absinthe in dark chocolate ganache and the dark and rich Arriba truffle —composed of 72% dark chocolate made from Forestero beans of Arriba origin.

French Broad: This chocolatier opened in Asheville in 2007 and does a nice job of giving the chocolate lover a big truffle for the buck. These were some of the largest truffles we tasted. Their Buddha Collection's vegan truffle was a favorite (composed of bitter sweet chocolate and coconut cream), lending the truffle a nice exotic edge. The Lavender and honey from the signature collection box—a milk chocolate ganache around a dark chocolate ganache blended with local honey and lavender—was the a delicious riff on lavender. The mole negro—housemade mole in dark chocolate and rolled in sesame seeds—great texture and spice.

Sixth Course: Owners Bridget Labus and Gianina Serrano, spent 15 years as pastry chefs in the San Francisco area before opening Sixth Course. Top tastes included the honey and fennel pollen truffle and the Champagne Fizz.

La Maison du Chocolat: One of my favorite French chocolatiers—a large company that still creates fresh, exquisite chocolates. Keep it simple and go for their alcohol-infused collection featuring cognac, whiskey and sake infused dark chocolate ganache.

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