

10 great places for a sweet chocolate feast

Valentine's Day is when thoughts turn to love — and chocolate. Across the country, artisan chocolatiers and candy factories alike are gearing up for a sweet holiday, says **Kay Harwell Fernandez**, creator of the *Chocolate Travel* app (Sutro Media, \$2.99), available on iTunes. "There are hundreds of great chocolate destinations that people can enjoy." She shares some favorites with **Larry Bleiberg** for USA TODAY.

Original Hawaiian Chocolate

Kailua, Hawaii

This family-run plantation in the Kona region of the Big Island offers a rare chance to see every step of chocolate-making from tree to treat. "You see these huge pods and you see the tiny, tiny bean that's roasted and ground and made into chocolate," Fernandez says. "The whole process takes around 30 days." Visitors love the roasted cacao nibs, made from partially ground beans. 888-447-2626; ohcf.us

Cacao Atlanta

Atlanta

This "bean to bar" chocolatier uses raw cacao to make her luscious candies. "It's like a fine wine, using the best beans there are," Fernandez says. She recommends the chocolate-dipped fruit and handcrafted truffles like the Italian Cowboy, made with espresso and bourbon, and the Aztec Aphrodisiac, which has a hint of chile. 404-221-9090; cacaoatlanta.com

Carnival Cruise Lines chocolate buffet

Other cruise ships offer chocolate buffets, but Fernandez is particularly impressed by the cocoa free-for-all available on many sailings. "Carnival goes all-out. It takes up to 10 pastry chefs on each ship working around the clock to get this buffet together," she says. Standouts include chocolate wontons and chocolate rum-raisin pudding. 888-227-6482; carnival.com

Chocolate-Covered February

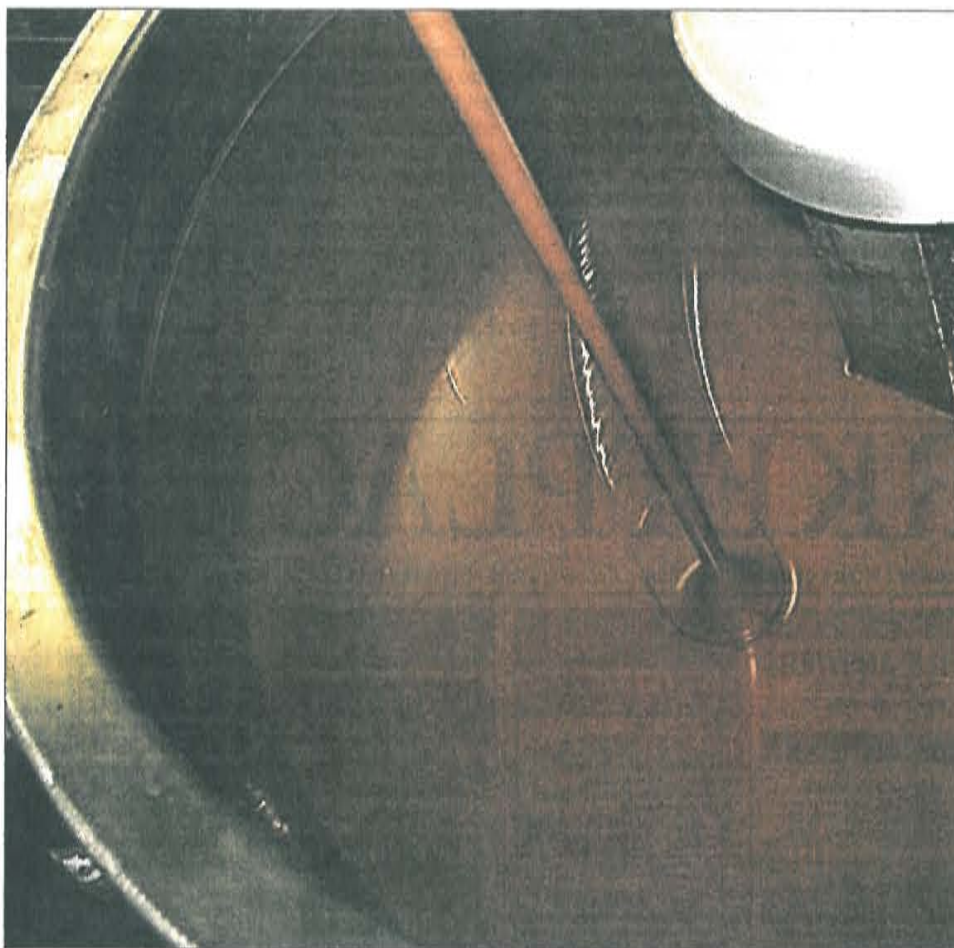
Hershey, Pa.

The home of Hershey's chocolate makes for a sweet visit any time of year, but Fernandez says this month is a standout. The Hotel Hershey does a chocolate and wine pairing and has a huge chocolate dessert buffet, and the Hershey spa recently introduced an edible chocolate facial that will be available year-round. Special chocolate lab classes are offered at the Hershey Story museum. 800-437-7439; hersheypa.com

Chicago Chocolate Tours

Chicago

These year-round walking tours show off the sweet side of the Second City, hitting fine chocolate shops, patisseries, bakeries and lounges in the downtown Loop and neighborhoods. The company has launched a cupcake route, and tonight it features its annual chocolate Champagne tour. "It really runs the gamut. They're very thorough and diverse in what they do," Fernandez says. 312-929-2939; chicagochocolatetours.com



Photos by Mark Miller

Kailua, Hawaii: Guests can see the entire chocolate-making process from cacao bean to candy bar at Original Hawaiian Chocolate in the Kona region on the Big Island.

Ethel M Factory Tour

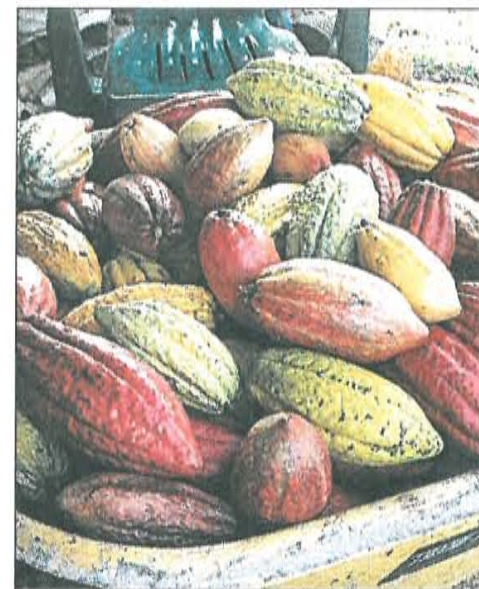
Henderson, Nev.

Part of the famous Mars candy dynasty, this privately owned factory offers a sweet break from nearby Las Vegas casinos. "It's a mass-producer, but it has truffles and cream-filled chocolates and caramels," Fernandez says. She recommends a visit to the adjacent botanical desert garden, which has 350 different plants. "There are benches where you can sit and take it all in — and eat your chocolate." 702-435-2655; ethelm.com

Mt. Washington Valley Ski Touring & Snowshoe Foundation's Chocolate Festival

Intervale, N.H.

This festival (Feb. 26 this year) lets you burn off calories between chocolate indulgences by snowshoeing or cross-country skiing among nine host inns and stops. (You also can drive or take a shuttle.) Each break features its own chocolate treat, from chocolate fondue to brownie sundaes, and is about 15 minutes from the next stop. "That's a very innovative way to do a chocolate festival," Fernandez says. 603-356-9920; crosscountryskin.com



Raw materials: Freshly harvested cacao beans before processing at Original Hawaiian Chocolate.

Gail Ambrosius Chocolatier

Madison, Wis.

French-trained artisan chocolatier Gail Ambrosius travels to Central and South America and beyond seeking sustainably grown cacao beans. Her chocolates are single-source, meaning they include beans from only one area, and they happen to be delicious. "She designs beautiful chocolate, some hand-painted. It's just gorgeous," Fernandez says. 608-249-3500; gailambrosius.com

Norman Love Confections and Salon

Fort Myers, Fla.

What could be better than eating Norman Love's premium chocolate? Learning how to make it yourself, that's what. This well-known chocolatier offers hands-on classes spring through summer. Fernandez loves the hot sipping chocolate: "This is not your everyday cocoa. It isn't graded or powdered. It's made with fresh chocolate." 866-515-2121; normanloveconfections.com

Spa by Diane Loring

Ventura, Calif.

Fernandez suggests treating the body and senses with a chocolate sugar body scrub for couples. The treatment uses chocolate-scented oil combined with honey body sugar, which exfoliates and leaves skin soft and smooth. "It's a very sensory-overload experience. It smells so good," Fernandez says. And to top it off, she recommends one of the spa's double-trouble chocolate cookies. 805-641-0022; spaventura.com



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