

Cross to the dark side this Valentine's Day

By Patricia Barrett

Shame on you if your idea of Valentine's chocolate for your sweetie constitutes a careless swing of the arm towards a heart-shaped box of brand-name chocolate on a store shelf.

Think about this: did Valentine, the third-century Roman Saint responsible for overseeing the well-being of those committed to Christian union, prowl vendors' stalls in the shadow of the Palatine Hill for a sugar-laden chocolate confection whose effects dwindled in roughly the same amount of time it later took to haul him in for questioning and beheading?

I think not.

Run-of-the-mill chocolate doesn't measure up to the long-lasting power of that containing high concentrations of cocoa (alternatively spelled cacao), according to the Interlake's Queen of Chocolate.

Doreen Pendgracs has travelled the world on an aptly named "chocolatour" in search of cocoa producers and chocolate-makers quietly trumping big candy bar companies in the purity/quality department.

"You're now crossing into the dark side," she said as she laid out several samples of the good stuff (sans highly addictive sugar) during a cocoa-literacy exercise she hosted at her Matlock home.

Amsterdam-based Original Beans is one company that sources cocoa beans from around the world. It makes about 10 different chocolate bars, each with its own "personality," title and unique story.

The Cru Udzungwa bar, for example, is 70-per cent cocoa derived from beans grown in Tanzania. It contains nibs (pulverised beans) and pays homage to African elephants.

"Warm whispers of orange and toffee reverberate as the Cru Udzungwa makes its way through your senses, echoing the elephants' playfully winding journey from the mountain forest to the savannah," said Pendgracs, quoting from the bar's wrapper.

Patience is key to an enlightened dark-side journey. This is isn't chocolate you find at a highway rest-stop and quickly stuff in your mouth. Having hosted chocolate-appreciation events in Winnipeg and the Interlake, Pendgracs knows the art of fine chocolate consumption.

One must take a mouse-sized portion on the tip of the tongue and adroitly manoeuvre it to the junction of the hard and soft palates where it will slowly melt and release a veritable garden of flavour.

Pendgracs, trying the Cru Udzungwa for the first time, signalled her approval by slapping her palm several times on the kitchen counter before saying, "That is absolutely delicious. Holy S--t."

Expletive is right. There's no other way to describe the artful onset of earthy flavours inherent in this cocoa bean from the east coast of Africa.

Cocoa plants are grown in equatorial regions. They contain hints of fruit and nuts because they're often grown among food-bearing plants, said Pendgracs.

"You always get notes of acidic berries in Peruvian chocolate."

And those mindful of weight don't have to worry about entering the dark side and exiting with a whole host of excess baggage, so to speak.

"When you eat this kind of chocolate, it tells you when enough is enough," said Pendgracs. "It's true. You don't gorge on good chocolate — it's like open-



EXPRESS PHOTO COURTESY OF DOREEN PENDGRACS
Pendgracs visited a spa where she underwent a cocoa facial while conducting research for her book on the world's best chocolate.

ing a good bottle of wine. You would never drink the whole bottle and it's the same with the chocolate: one or two pieces and it's plenty. Trust me. It's not a [matter of] tolerance. It's just that your mind says, 'OK, I enjoyed that, but that's enough.'"

The after-effects of 60, 70 or 80 per cent chocolate are nothing like those you get from a chocolate candy bar, which sends you skywards for about 15 minutes then suddenly drops you without a parachute. You might as well shovel heaping teaspoons of sugar into your mouth because that's the main ingredient in the cheapies.

There's also stuff like "sodium bicarbonate, yeast, polyglycerol, poly-something else — this isn't even nearly the worst," said Pendgracs, rattling off the ingredients on a candy bar.

In addition to purity, Original Beans adheres to an ethos sure to please environmentally and socially conscious Western-Hemisphere consumers. The company plants one tree for every bar sold.

"Each tree planted in a healthy cacao forest absorbs 274 g more CO₂ than a chocolate bar emits in production," states the package.

The company also provides female cocoa producers with "seedlings and education."

Consumers may be unaware of the "other" dark side of cocoa production.

Child labour — which is getting worse, not better — and low wages paid to cocoa farmers are big issues in the chocolate industry, said Zack Gross, outreach co-ordinator with the Manitoba Council for International Cooperation.

"How do you feel," he asked, "if you're eating a chocolate bar and you realize little kids are chopping down the cocoa pods, cutting them open, getting injured and not going to school? ... People [western consumers] need to be shocked into doing something about it."

Poverty drives farmers to use child labour in West African countries, wrote Gross in a book review of *Chocolate Nations* for the Winter/Spring 2017 edition of Fair Trade Magazine.

"I think a lot of the conventional chocolate companies, like Cadbury or Hershey, are actually starting

to be more aware of the fact that they've got to be better to their producers," he said, "or they're going to find themselves without any chocolate to sell."

Cocoa plants are also suffering from climate change, prompting some companies to invest in sustainable farming methods.

Consumers can do their part, said Gross, by buying chocolate labelled Fair Trade, a system that provides growers with a 10 per cent premium.

"When you're buying Fair Trade chocolate, you're supporting a system that's not only going to pay people better, but it's also going to keep cocoa plantations or co-operatives going."

Another plus to Fair Trade chocolate is that it tends to be "more gourmet or higher quality," he said.

In her 2013 book, *Chocolatour: A Quest for the World's Best Chocolate*, Pendgracs included a section on companies mindful of sustainability and ethical practice.

But her focus is the "gourmet" aspect of chocolate.

And to accentuate the pleasure of fine chocolate, she laid an assortment of different libations before the *Express* and asked, "Do you really want to go over the top?"

She moved from a dry stout to a spicy whiskey to a vanilla-infused liqueur. Finding the right combination of bean and booze is no doddle.

"We don't need too much [alcohol]," she cautioned. "It's just to get the flavour."

Where the journey took a sharp turn was the moment Pendgracs laid out two samples of 100 per cent chocolate (company names obscured) made from beans grown on different continents.

There's no nice way to say this: full-on cocoa tastes awful. One sample tasted like a piece of gyprock doused with tincture of iodine.

It may only be a matter of acquired taste, though. Don't make a yucky face like Pendgracs did and head for the dustbin. If you can master head cheese or pickled herrings, 100 per cent chocolate should be a snap.

As to claims that cocoa can prevent disease, take them with a grain of salt.

Cocoa has been said to help reduce chronic inflammation that marks diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis, coronary artery disease, diabetes mellitus and Parkinson's and Alzheimer's disease, but medical research has yet to deliver conclusive evidence.

A 2016 study titled "Impact of Cocoa Consumption on Inflammation Processes — A Critical Review of Randomized Controlled Trials" in the journal *Nutrients* states that "the evidence for anti-inflammatory effects of cocoa consumption is currently low. Further RCTs [randomised controlled trials] ... are needed."

St. Valentine himself may have been able to cure disease. Known as the patron saint of epilepsy, he performed "miraculous cures," according to the University of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum, which has a significant amulet collection.

Whether he did it with dark chocolate is unknown.

Pendgracs is hosting a one-day "chocolatour" of Winnipeg chocolate companies on Friday, May 12th. A private coach from Gimli will depart at 8:30 a.m. Cost is \$95 per person. Call Doreen at 204-389-4177 or email doreen@chocolatour.net to reserve a spot.