

Wine Spectator

www.winespectator.com

WINE LOVER'S GUIDE

Our Editors Share Their Favorite Wines, Restaurants and More



OREGON: 250 WINES RATE 90+

DISCOVER NEW YORK'S FINGER LAKES

THE BEST RARE WHISKIES

CHOCOLATE FOR VALENTINE'S DAY

CHOCOLATE

Candy for Grown-ups

BY OWEN DUGAN

For Valentine's Day I usually step away from serious bean-to-bar analysis, processing, origin and other vaguely scientific pursuits to focus on what this day is all about: pleasure. This year I am providing a collection of some of the best chocolate candies I have had in the past 12 months. I've noted each under a flavor category; these are not rigid, but do give a handy thumbnail. Remember to taste beyond your usual favorites though; it's a good holiday for exploration.

1 SALT: Domori is one of the best Italian producers of single-origin bars. Founder Gianluca Franzoni has done as much as anyone in the business to source distinct cacao and process each variety into a unique bar. The D-Fusion line incorporates a single flavor—spicy peppers or mint—into a bar deemed to have complementary flavors. They are all good, and give off a lot of aromas when you open the package. My favorite is the milk with Guérande sea salt. The creamy chocolate is fairly dark for milk, and has tropical fruit notes, with salt cutting the sweetness and fattiness with a bright, almost savory bite.
www.chocosphere.com; \$4.25 for a 0.88-ounce bar

2 FRUIT: This producer is a new one to me. Byrne & Carlson makes beautiful bars, but don't hold that against them. The range of offerings produced by this New Hampshire company runs from simple almond-studded bars to florid ones decorated with candied pansies. Break a piece of chocolate free from the toppings and you will find very high quality, not the middling stuff sometimes used as a vehicle for big added flavors or decorative confections. And the toppings themselves are excellent. The candied fruits are not just sweet, but also have some acid, providing a good balance of flavors.
www.byrneandcarlson.com; \$8 for a 4.75-ounce bar

3 CARAMEL: Napa-based Woodhouse opened in 2004, two years after founders John and Tracy Anderson sold their S. Anderson Vineyards and opened this chocolate business with their family. They produce terrific bonbons and flavored bars, but the chocolate caramels are what I like best. There is a natural kinship between burnt sugar and chocolate, a certain savoriness they produce in the mouth. Woodhouse works that angle and emphasizes it with a hit of salt from a variety of origins and styles. My favorite example is the smoked paprika-salt version, which stays with you as sweet and toasty flavors turn to spice and linger on the palate.
www.woodhousechocolate.com; \$12 for six caramels

4 COFFEE: Shawn Askinosie was a criminal-defense lawyer who heeded the call of chocolate-making in 2005. The Missouri-based bean-to-bar producer quickly entered the top ranks of fine American chocolatiers with a small range of single-origin bars. He has since teamed up with like-minded small producers to create flavored bars. From the beginning he has touted his farmers, and this coffee bar, from his Col-laBARation line, is no different. The dark chocolate comes from Peter Cruz, a farmer in the Philippines, and is rich and surprisingly creamy. The coffee, provided by Chicago-based roaster Intelligentsia, comes from Oaxaca, Mexico (though the origin may change due to availability). It is a bold, delicious bar.
www.askinosie.com; \$9 for a 3-ounce bar

5 HERBS: Shawn McClure started his company, Patric, in Missouri around the same time as Askinosie. McClure had hunted down great chocolate while living in France, and upon returning home naively decided to try to make it himself. Within a couple of years, his small company was born. The mint and nib bar is fascinating. A strong, rich chocolate flavor shows first, followed by a subtle mint hint that grows until it dominates entirely. A refreshing chocolate. (Note: Quantities are limited; by the time you read this, he might not still be making this bar. Quality, however, is consistently high.)
www.patric-chocolate.com; \$7.99 for a 2.3-ounce bar

6 SPICE: Chile peppers in chocolate have been in vogue for a few years. They can be quite good, but often the heat goes beyond stimulating the palate and ends up masking the flavors the chocolate is trying to broadcast. Dolfin, a Belgian producer, solves the problem by using pink peppercorns instead. They have a mild heat—more of an awakening than an assault—and a floral fruit element that comes out with the fairly sweet bar. It is quite aromatic; think hot chocolate in a spice shop.
www.atthemeadow.com; \$5.95 for a 2.47-ounce bar

7 WINE: Delysia is a tiny confectioner in Austin, Texas. Among the company's output is a range of "truffles" (although I would call them filled or molded chocolates) in a number of collections, one of which is wine. The three flavors are Cabernet, Merlot and Port, all sourced from Becker Vineyards. They are balanced; the wine is there, but does not dominate. The chocolate is sweet and good. Serve these blind.
www.delysia.com; \$27 for 2.5 ounces (nine pieces)

Owen Dugan is features editor of Wine Spectator.

