

The gift of sweets

How chocolate became tied to Valentine's Day

The various types of chocolate

Valentine's Day is a popular time to indulge in sweets. In fact, according to Nielsen, more than 58 million pounds of chocolate candy will be sold during the week of Valentine's Day.

Chocolate wasn't always the sugar-sweetened dessert people consume today. The history of chocolate dates back to 1900 BC, when Aztecs believed the cacao seeds were the gift of Quetzalcoatl, the god of wisdom. Chocolate was made into fermented beverages, and the cacao beans also were used as a form of currency because they held so much value.

According to the History Channel, some ancient civilizations considered chocolate to be a mood enhancer and aphrodisiac. Chocolate was believed to have mystical properties and was revered so much that it was reserved for rulers, warriors and priests.

It was not until centuries later that edible chocolate became popular among the masses. Dutch chemist Coenraad Johannes van Houten invented the cocoa press, which could turn extrude cocoa butter, paving the way for the modern age of chocolate as a confectionary ingredient and gift.

Choosing the right type of chocolate may require gaining an understanding of various chocolate-related terms.

- **Cocoa powder:** This is the unsweetened raw form of cocoa made from partially defatted chocolate liquor. Dutch-processed (alkalized) cocoa powder is milder and less acidic than natural cocoa powder.

- **Unsweetened chocolate:** "Bitter" or "baking chocolate" are other names attributed to unsweetened chocolate. It is best used in baking when it can be combined with sugar and other ingredients. It is also the base ingredient of most forms of chocolate, with the exception of white chocolate.

- **Dark chocolate:** Chocolate that contains only chocolate liquor, sugar, cocoa butter, vanilla, and lecithin is considered dark chocolate. No milk solids are added in. The higher the percentage on the wrapper, the more bitter the chocolate.

- **Milk chocolate:** In addition to dark chocolate ingredients, milk chocolate also contains dry milk solids or condensed milk. It is sweet and has a mild chocolate taste.

- **Bittersweet and semi-sweet:** These chocolates are milder than dark chocolate, but not as sweet as milk chocolate. Many chocolate manufacturers derive their own formulations for these types of chocolate, varying the amount of cocoa solids they include.

- **Couverture chocolate:** An expensive chocolate, this is coveted by professional bakers or confectioners. It contains a high percent of cocoa butter and chocolate liquor, which helps it to melt evenly. It is ideal for tempering and can coat candies smoothly.

- **Ganache:** Ganache is a whipped filling, glaze, icing, or sauce that is used in various desserts. It is made by heating cream and pouring over chocolate of any kind. When cooled, it is malleable but not runny, which is why ganache is often used in making candies or fillings.

- **Truffle:** A chocolate truffle is made from a ball of ganache rolled in cocoa powder. Truffles can be made from any variety of chocolate.



Hearth-shaped boxes filled with decadent treats are coveted gifts on Valentine's Day. Chocolate lovers typically have a favorite type of chocolate, whether it's creamy filled truffles or chocolate pieces with fruit or nut fillings.

The tradition of gifting chocolate is anything but new. Chocolate and other sweet treats have been offered for centuries as prized gifts. Even ancient Aztecs and Mayans celebrated chocolate and saw it as a hot commodity.

Drinks made of cacao beans would be given as presents to people of high status. Chocolate also would be offered to the gods as a token of appreciation.

Cacao beans were even used as a form of currency at one point.

During the 17th century, chocolate consumption grew considerably across Europe. Chocolate houses cropped up in London, and the French elite often indulged in chocolate. Chocolate's popularity continued to grow, but the dessert was not linked to Valentine's Day until nearly 200 years later. In the mid-1800s, an enterprising individual named Richard Cadbury was looking for a way to make chocolate even more popular than it already was. He sought out a method to make drinking chocolate more palatable and created "eating chocolates." These chocolates were packaged in decorative boxes. Eventually, Cadbury saw the benefit of putting images of cupids and roses on the boxes. Cadbury even designed chocolate boxes in the shape of hearts that could be saved as mementos. These chocolates soon became intertwined with Valentine's Day celebrations.

Traditionally, men have gifted women with boxes of chocolate for Valentine's Day. However, that role is reversed in other areas of the world. For example, in Japan, women give gifts — namely chocolates — to the men in their lives to express love, courtesy or social obligation. Chocolate has long been tied to Valentine's Day gifting. Whether

one believes that chocolate symbolizes heightened status, acts as an aphrodisiac or is just a special treat, chocolates will likely always be associated with the day of love.

Chocolate has long been tied to Valentine's Day. Whether one believes that chocolate symbolizes heightened status, acts as an aphrodisiac or is just a special treat, chocolates will likely always be associated with the day of love.

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