



Food Politics

CHOCOLATE: The Dark & The Light Of It

by Maria Noël Groves, Clinical Herbalist & Co-op Wellness Educator



During November and December, the Co-op sells boxes and boxes, bars and bars, and wrappers and wrappers full of chocolate. The holiday displays are a chocolate-lover's dream, and you can choose from a dizzying array of flavors, shapes, and sizes. For most of us, the question is: Dark or milk? But that isn't the only duality in the world of chocolate. As you nibble your chocolate squares, sip on hot cocoa, and give the gift of cacao, here are a few points to ponder...

Child Labor vs Fair-Trade

You've likely heard about the "blood diamond" industry. The conventional chocolate industry isn't far off. According to Equal Exchange, a leader in the fair-trade movement and based out of nearby Massachusetts, "In the cocoa belt of West Africa's Ivory Coast, it's common to see young children holding machetes or pesticide equipment without protective gear." More than 1.8 million children in West Africa are involved in growing cocoa, and the Ivory Coast produces 40 percent of the world's cacao supply. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), hundreds of thousands of these children are engaged in the worst forms of child labor, including slavery, human trafficking, abuse, and dangerous or hazardous conditions or materials.

How can you avoid "blood chocolate"? Start by taking a closer look at the label. Fair-trade companies must abide by 10 principles in their day-to-day operations. These include, most famously, fair wages for farmers, but they also branch out to other important values such as no child or forced labor, nondiscrimination, good working conditions, respecting the environment, and transparency and accountability. Nearly all of the chocolate sold at the Co-op is certified fair trade.

What about organic? Organic certification ensures that it is sustainably grown without synthetic chemicals. The organic certification has nothing to do with fair trade or labor; however most organic chocolate is also certified fair trade.

Indie vs Corporate

Big corps are eating every industry out there, and chocolate is no different. Even some of our favorite "good" chocolate brands like Dagoba, Green & Black's, and Seeds of Change are owned by major candy companies. That doesn't mean the quality of the chocolate is bad, but it does mean that the profits also support a larger industry. If supporting smaller, independent businesses is important to you, seek out brands like Alter Eco, Divine, Taza,

and (my two favorites!) Theo and Equal Exchange.

Healthy Choices? Quality Counts

You may not devour a bar of chocolate with its health benefits in mind, but emerging research strongly supports chocolate's place in a healthy diet... even as medicine! People have been enjoying and eating the cocoa bean for at least 2,000 years, beginning in the deep tropical rainforests of Central America. According to the Cornell University Library, early Spanish writings on chocolate described the Mayan and Aztec beliefs that cacao was a gift from the gods. (Think: The movie *Chocolat*.) However, the healing powers of cacao aren't just magical fancies. Studies suggest that chocolate (dark chocolate and less processed cacao in particular) can lower blood pressure, decrease the risk of stroke, and improve the quality of blood vessel lining, among other things. It also contains a bit of energizing caffeine, a good supply of magnesium (especially in cacao nibs), can boost the mood, and may even help with diabetes and weight loss (provided it's eaten in modest quantities and isn't too high in sugar and dairy).

Unfortunately, milk chocolate is nearly devoid of the beneficial polyphenols that make chocolate so good for us. And white chocolate has none. In fact – while white chocolate is traditionally made with lots of cocoa butter, sugar, and vanilla – some conventional brands contain no chocolate at all! Of course, if you love white chocolate, you can still enjoy it... just know that you won't be getting cocoa's antioxidant benefits.

Chocolate (in the form of cocoa powder or nibs) is one of my favorite "synergists" to put in tea and tincture blends for energy and heart health. One tasty tea, inspired by an article in a magazine, blends cocoa nibs with rooibos and some freshly snipped vanilla bean. Delicious! A traditional way to make a healthy cocoa beverage is to pour hot water over a few squares of dark chocolate. As the heat melts the chocolate over the next 30 minutes or so, stir it together and re-heat if necessary. If you'd like, add a pinch of cayenne and cinnamon. This technique is not as creamy as your traditional cocoa, but it's still quite tasty! You can also check out the selection of quality hot cocoa available at the Co-op, both with and without dairy added. One sugar-free option is made locally by In Joy Organics.

Fortunately, you can indulge your love for chocolate without leaving your values and your health by the wayside. We now have more quality options than ever, and the Co-op is a great source for your holiday and winter chocolate needs. Enjoy! ■

Maria runs Wintergreen Botanicals Herbal Clinic & Education Center, nestled in Bear Brook State Park. Learn more and find her favorite chocolate recipes at www.wintergreenbotanicals.com.