

Chocolate: New York wants 'cocoa mecca'

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watch the candymakers in white gowns assembling goodies amid the mini-factory's gleaming silver tubes and vats. The spacious, light-filled, unpretentious cafe has a warm and welcoming staff. Cookies and other treats are also available.

Warm up at Payard (1032 Lexington Ave. near 73rd Street) if you've been out in Central Park. You can have a meal or any type of pastry at this busy patisserie and bistro, but chocoholics should sit at the bar and order from the Masterpiece collection of chocolates named for painters. Picasso is dark chocolate flavored with Earl Gray; Van Gogh is chocolate with pistachio, and Chagall has pralines.

In Soho, spend the day migrating among chocolate shops, designer boutiques (Chanel, Ann Taylor, Nicole Miller), and one-of-a-kind stores like Evolution, which sells skulls and other artifacts, or Morrison Hotel, which sells photos of musicians.

The trendy Vosges Haut Chocolat (132 Spring St., near Greene) offers unusual combinations, like white chocolate with olive oil and Kalamata olives, and "Budapest" — dark chocolate with Hungarian paprika.

A few blocks away, Lunettes et Chocolat (25 Prince St., near Mott), gives new meaning to the phrase eye candy. The store sells

eyeglass frames — \$225 to \$1,000 — and MarieBelle chocolates — two for \$7. Chocolates here are miniature works of art, topped with colorful, edible geometric designs and silhouettes, all silkscreened on cocoa butter with natural food coloring. Wash them down with spicy hot chocolate, containing cinnamon, nutmeg and chipotle. (Another MarieBelle is located at 484 Broome St., near West Broadway.)

For an evening of chocolate, The Ritz—Carlton Battery Park (Two West Street, at the foot of Manhattan, near the Bowling Green subway station) has a "Chocolate Bar," Fridays and Saturdays in February and on Feb. 14, Valentine's Day. The \$65-per-person buffet includes champagne, tax and tip; scrumptious chocolate martinis are worth the extra \$15.

The view from the Ritz of New York Harbor, with the Statue of Liberty and city lights twinkling against a winter's night sky, is as stunning as the desserts, which include a warm, molten chocolate cake with vanilla ice cream; tiny chocolate pyramids; strawberries dipped in chocolate; plus mousses, cremes, candies and other creations.

The hotel's chocolate chef, Laurent Richard, is also a sculptor. Look for his chocolate renderings of a chess set, Willy Wonka and the Statue of Liberty, along with a lifesize statue of himself.

Children with a generous sugar daddy — or mommy — might try the \$100 Volcano at the newly reopened FAO Schwarz (58th Street and Fifth Avenue). This chocolate-and-ice cream concoction, with candy boulders and chocolate caramel lava, serves four; kids get hardhats and shovels before digging in. Also at FAO's sweet shop: M & M's in more than two dozen colors and an edible chocolate toy chest with candy and ice cream.

Despite New York's burgeoning chocolate scene, it will never be a native New York tradition. Nicolas Bernarde, pastry expert at Paris' famous Cordon Bleu cooking school, points out that cocoa beans come from the Ivory Coast, Venezuela, New Guinea, Indonesia and Brazil. Those beans are processed, for the most part, in Europe. New York chefs then use that chocolate to create their treats.

But chocolate could be another immigrant success story.

"You just need to promote five or six chocolate cafes that open, a good advertising slogan so people talk about it, good chocolates ... and it will take off," Bernarde said.

Still, French chocolatier Michel Richard says New Yorkers looking to make their city a cocoa mecca "still have work to do ... Europe will remain the world capital for chocolate for a long time yet."

Bringing chocolate home via mail

For students who don't have the time or money to fly to New York — or Paris, Brussels or Geneva for that matter — there's still hope. Many of these chocolate stores, cafes and patisseries deliver, offering the convenience of sampling their fine delicacies at home. These web sites enable students to order their chocolate fix before they can say "FedEx."

www.scharffenberger.com — Scharffen Berger Chocolate Maker specializes in dark chocolate and claims it has gifts to fit any budget and palate. It ships chocolate bars,

squares and a special series of Scharffen Berger panned products that are based on the traditional French confections from old-world candy shops.

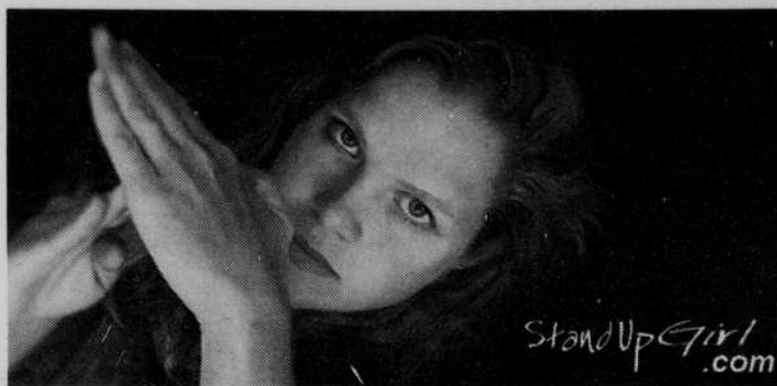
www.mrchocolate.com — Jacques Torres Chocolate creates fresh, hand-crafted chocolates without using preservatives or artificial flavors. It has champagne truffles, boxed assortments and tins of hot chocolate made with real chocolate — not powder. It also has a three, six or 12-month chocolate-by-the-month plan.

www.payard.com — Payard ships unique chocolate delicacies, such as a Mint Julep Cup and Payard Chocolate Tablettes for

reasonable prices. Try the Round Vanilla Rum Truffles, a company best-seller.

www.vosgeschocolate.com — Vosges' exotic truffles are made in an 'East meets West' theme using a mix of rare spices, flowers and premium chocolate for a true "haut-chocolat" experience. The exotic truffle flavors include Viola, Ambrosia and Absinthe. It also has sweets such as Caramel Marshmallows — a marshmallow sandwiched around chewy caramel, walnut and pecan pieces and covered in dark chocolate and toffee crumbles.

— Ashley Griffin



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