



Epiqueerean BY JENNY NGUYEN

Chocolate Renaissance

Thanks to local farmers markets, open-minded chocoholics and those fed up with the Nestles, Hersheys and Cadburys of today's mini-mart tastes, a chocolate renaissance of sorts is taking place in our fair city. Below you will find shops with handfuls of potentially mind-blowing melt-in-your-mouth cacao masterpieces. Each choc-shop is distinctively unique, from location to persuasion to inventive infusions. The common thread is the rendezvous of you and your chocolate euphoria.

Verdun • 421 N.W. 10th Ave.

This swanky chocolate boutique in the Pearl has been called the Tiffany's of chocolates. Shipped from Lebanon, these ultra-fine chocolates are wrapped individually in distinctive shapes and colored foil. Though gorgeous and the choices plentiful, no truffles can be found here. These chocolates are strictly solid, with nuts and/or fruit. The couture is shiny and dark, but the mouthfeel is consistently waxy and lacks flavor. For gift baskets, aesthetic value and palates that prefer a thicker, snappier chocolate, Verdun is your bag. Don't fret the flow: Of the three chocolatiers, Verdun hosts the cheapest price per piece.

Alma Chocolates • 140 N.E. 28th Ave.

Touted as "almost sin-free" chocolates, Alma delivers fresh, fair trade and organic ingredients in all its confections. The tiny shop explodes with chocolate spirituality: From the gorgeous owner, Sarah Hart, to the dark chocolate Virgin statues, Alma makes even the most pessimistic sugar-wary visitors instant bean believers. Kneel down to killer cocoa combos like lavender and Portuguese sea salt or star anise and rosemary. Even seemingly ordinary infusions of bourbon and candied ginger become dark divinity. The Holy Grail lies in the white chocolate brittle; paired with lime zest and pine nuts, skeptics will repent. The creamy, rich ganache that melts on contact is truly euphoric. Hints of acidity are welcoming in these potent chocolates, as is the intensity of the infusions. The secret is out—head here, all you sinners.

Sahagún • 10 N.W. 16th Ave.

The tiniest, most conspicuously located blisserie is also one of Portland's most well-publicized little businesses. Written up in the *Merc*, *Willy Week* and even *The New York Times*, Sahagún is, in one word, outstanding. Delicate truffles twinkle with pearlescent confectioner's dust, as the magnificent Elizabeth Montes barely outshines her masterful handiwork. Dollops of dark chocolate from Ecuador and Venezuela are saturated with sumptuous flavors from floral rose/geranium to tantalizing jalapeño/pumpkin seed. Each handmade chocolate begs to be devoured but must be savored slowly, appropriately, to release all its subtle intricacies. Perhaps the city's best hot chocolate resides here, boasting 75 percent cocoa content melted with free-range half-and-half; this is as close to drinking nirvana as humanly possible. As you wait with chocolate on your tongue, close your eyes and remember that the Latin term for chocolate, *theobroma*, translates to "food of the Gods." Sahagún is a sacred, sweet sanctuary to part your lips and pray. 10

JENNY NGUYEN is a Portland native who cooks, eats and writes. Give her advice on all these and more by contacting her at epiqueerean@comcast.net.

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