

# DEPARTURES



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# GRAND AFFAIR

The Party of the Year

# THE CHOCO LUXE GUIDE

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Imagine that someone asked you to write the definitive guide to the world's best chocolate. Like a bonbon in the sun, the initial euphoria ("Does life get any better than this?") soon melts into something approaching panic ("How could I possibly find it all?"). I thought I knew my stuff, having just returned from a self-guided tour of some of the best chocolatiers in Paris. But I quickly learned that chocolate, like wine, has almost infinite depth and variation, not to mention

its own cast of superstars, villains, and rabid fans—a world that's part *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, part *Sideways*, with a dash of *Fitzcarraldo*.

Forget about your basic milk, white, and dark distinctions. True experts debate the merits of beans from São Tomé, Madagascar, and even Cuba. When Pierre Marcolini hears of a particularly rare crop, he buys the next five years' production to guarantee an exclusive. And at Christian Constant's Left Bank shop, single-origin bars made with criollo beans sell out immediately. I knew zilch about criollo until a few months ago, including how to pronounce it (cree-oh-yo), but now seek it out like a melting grail.

After months of devouring chocolate bars and bonbons from all over the world, my taste began to change. Originally a lover of sweet dark chocolate, curious about trendy-flavored ganaches, and a fan

surrounding such subtly flavored ganaches as oolong tea, espresso, and single-malt whiskey—exactly what you want to eat while sprawled on the recliner. But the best offering here is the pure butter caramels, hand-dipped in dark chocolate. Help! Order at 800-422-3726; [www.famschocolates.com](http://www.famschocolates.com).



E. Guittard

**GEARHARTS** Next May, get in the Kentucky Derby mood with giant handmade mint julep squares from this Charlottesville, Virginia, confectioner. They're the real thing. Order at 434-972-9100; [www.gearhartschocolates.com](http://www.gearhartschocolates.com).

**GODIVA** When the new Platinum Collection from the Campbell's Soup-owned company landed on my desk, I let out a groan. But...if Lamousse, Mokalata, and Razabelle float your cocoa boat, by all means indulge. Order at 800-946-3482; [www.godiva.com](http://www.godiva.com).

**GRENADA CHOCOLATE** A solar-powered cooperative in the Caribbean that assembles accomplished organic bars that are a vanilla-boosted balance between fruity and strong, with a tobacco finish. The limited-edition Hurricane Ivan bar, made in conjunction with London's Rococo Chocolates, consists of beans that were in production when the storm hit the island in 2004. Order at [www.chocosphere.com](http://www.chocosphere.com); [www.grenadachocolate.com](http://www.grenadachocolate.com).

**E. GUITTARD** Since 1868 this Bay Area family has been crafting chocolate in the French tradition. Today they produce some very fine

bars and couverture (one of the reasons that inexpensive See's Candies are such a good value is because the company purchases couverture from E. Guittard). I like the rounded fruitiness of the Ambanja bar from Madagascar and the spicy finish of the Chucuri from Colombia. Order at 800-468-2462; [www.guittard.com](http://www.guittard.com).

**PIERRE HERME** Whenever I wait in line for macaroons and a *deux-mille feuille* at his Paris shops, I try yet another of Hermé's seasonal offerings, like a mind-boggling ganache made toothsome with sesame seeds, or dark chocolate-covered strips of candied ginger. Though his heart is clearly in the pastries, his mind keeps whipping up some worthwhile chocolates. Purchase at Pierre Hermé shops in Paris, 33-1/43-54-47-77; [www.pierreherme.com](http://www.pierreherme.com) for locations.

**JEAN-PAUL HEVIN** At first I wasn't bowled over by Hévin. Maybe it was the number of shops he has in Paris (four handsome boutiques) and Japan (four and counting), or the fact that he introduces annual themes like a fashion designer; one cult hit is Epoisses—the famously stinky cheese. But that was at the beginning of my tastings. Later a box arrived that changed my tune. Light yet rich, with a depth of cocoa flavor that isn't upstaged by his subtle *parfums*, these are the real deal.

Particularly good are the meltingly soft ganaches in the lightly honeyed Carupana, the quiet ginger Zenzero, the midnight-dark vanilla Taha, and the Carbonado *paludé*, which gets its textural intrigue from nougatine and almonds. Purchase at Paris and Tokyo stores; [www.jinpatisserie.com](http://www.jinpatisserie.com) for locations.

**JIN PATISSERIE** The Singapore-born owner of this zen-deck Venice, California, tea house and bakery also makes very pretty chocolates. Red-Leaf Caramel Clove, Black Roasted Sesame, and Thé du Hammam are fine new discoveries. Order at 310-399-8801; [www.jinpatisserie.com](http://www.jinpatisserie.com).

**JOHN & KIRA'S** One day I had the great luck to hear chocolate expert Chloé Doure-Roussel help me. While she said the high appearance of these chocolates—made by a couple intent on locally grown loaves was unacceptable for their snappy texture and flavor—



**IN THE MIX**

Bored with familiar pairings, some chocolatiers are rummaging through the pantry in search of the next big ganache. Jean-Paul Hévin, for one, offers a sampler of chocolates combining Epoisses and cumin, Pont-L'Évêque with thyme, Roquefort with walnut, and goat cheese with hazelnut. Quel fromage!



Jin Patisserie

Fin counts. Be... among his taster... returned to his first love chocolate. His ganaches, named for women (I went for Elizabeth, "passionate lady with gingerly appearance");

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**HOT CHOCOLATES TO LOOK FOR**

**MarieBelle** Best of the spicy Aztec-style blends. 866-925-8800  
**Scherffen Berger** Nuanced and not as sweet as typical brews. 800-930-4528  
**Schmeling Drinking Chocolate** Nicely old-fashioned drink based on a 17th-century recipe. 866-972-6879