Written by Carol Pomeday
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Indulge. It’s health food. No kidding.

There are few people who love chocolate more than John Reichert and Elizabeth MacCrimmon, owners of the Chocolate Chisel in Port Washington.

The chocolate connoisseurs love talking about their product, making it and, of course, eating it.

“There are some days we’re so busy we don’t have time to stop to eat, so we eat chocolate,” MacCrimmon said. “I can’t tell you how many times we’ve had chocolate for breakfast and lunch. The cocoa bean is highly concentrated nutrition.” The couple are becoming versed on the health benefits of chocolate, espousing it as another reason — as if anyone needs a reason — for consuming what the Mayans called the “food of the gods.”

Both Mayan and Aztec cultures made a thick, unsweetened drink from the cocoa bean and added spices, even hot chili peppers, to flavor the drink they considered a health elixir, said MacCrimmon, who enjoys researching the benefits and history of the cocoa bean.

“The Aztecs believed that wisdom and power came from eating the fruit of the cocoa tree, and that it had nourishing, fortifying, even aphrodisiac qualities,” she said.

MacCrimmon wouldn’t comment on that claim, but said a lot of men buy chocolates for their wives and girlfriends.

While an equal number of men and women buy chocolate at the shop, she said, men usually

buy for a special female while women buy for themselves.

MacCrimmon will attest to the health benefits. She credits her favorite food for curing her migraine headaches.

“I used to have two or three headaches a week and was always told chocolate triggers migraines,” MacCrimmon said. “Since I’ve been eating so much chocolate, my headaches have gone away. My nutritionist thinks it’s the chocolate.”

Not all chocolate has the same healthful benefits. Dark chocolate that is at least 65% cocoa — the more cocoa the better — offers the greatest benefits, she said. It has the same flavanoids and antioxidants found in red wine and green tea.

As people have learned about the benefits of chocolate — consuming chocolate can lower cholesterol and blood pressure and improve blood vessels, some studies have shown — they have become more discerning in their tastes.

“There is a renaissance in the chocolate movement of going to a single-source, single-bean chocolate and appreciating the true taste from that region. They talk about chocolate the same as wines,” MacCrimmon said.

“Soil conditions affect the flavor. Nut and fruit trees growing near cocoa trees make a difference. The cocoa bean picks up the fruit and nut tones. Our (single-source) bars are not overly sweet. We add just enough sugar to make them palatable.”

Reichert, who is best known for his miniature pewter sculptures and ornaments, has turned his creative skills to making what he believes are the finest chocolates in the area.

He is teaching others to dip pretzels and make toffees and barks, but he makes all the single-source bars and truffles. He says it’s both a science and an art.

“It’s not worth it to work this hard making chocolate if it’s not the best,” he said.

“It’s amazing how making chocolate is similar to sculpting and making things out of clay. Because my sculptures are so precise, everything has to be done right. It’s the same with chocolate.

“We measure everything precisely so we can reproduce it, but then we start tweaking it until it’s the best it can be. Our raspberry truffle is the fourth generation.”

Reichert buys chocolate from a Swiss source and uses only natural flavorings, such as powdered banana and mandarin oil. A triple-distilled mint costs $50 a pound and raspberry marmalade from Switzerland costs $100 a pound.

Oil-soluble colorings are used to get intense colors. Reichert often airbrushes tinted cocoa butter into molds before coating the sides of the molds with chocolate. The molds are then filled

with a flavored chocolate ganache, a chocolate, cream and butter mixture that Reichert makes, stirring it by hand to the right consistency. He seals the bottom of the truffle with more chocolate.

Chocolates must cool away from drafts, moisture or heat. Most are put in a temperature-controlled cooling cabinet to set. The display cases are also temperature controlled.

Reichert makes some molds — the most popular is red chocolate lips — and also uses commercial molds, selecting a different shape for each flavor.

A key to creating fine chocolates is the tempering process, he said. Chocolate is heated to 100 degrees in tempering pots, then cooled to the desired temperature as paddles stir the melted chocolate. The temperature depends on the type of chocolate, but it is between 89 and 93 degrees. More chocolate is added during the tempering process and it is tested every hour to make sure it is the right temperature.

If the tempering or cooling process is not right, the chocolates will have a bloom, or white coating, on it.

“It still tastes good, but it looks bad, and we’re all about making things look beautiful,” MacCrimmon said.

When Reichert makes single-source chocolate bars, he must clean the tempering pot so there is no other chocolate in it. He makes bars from beans grown in Venezuela, Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, Ghana and Madagascar. Cocoa trees grow along the equator.

Reichert uses chocolate that has been conched for 50 to 72 hours. Conching is the process of adding cocoa butter and sugar to the cocoa and pulverizing it into such tiny particles that they are indistinguishable to the taste buds.

“The longer it’s conched, the finer and smoother it is, and it brings out the more subtle flavor notes,” MacCrimmon said. “Most companies have gone to chocolate that’s conched only seven hours.”

In ancient cultures, cocoa beans were so valuable that they were used for currency. Four cocoa beans bought a rabbit, 10 beans bought the services of a prostitute and 100 beans bought a slave, MacCrimmon said.

Reportedly, Aztec Emperor Montezuma offered the cocoa drink to the Spanish explorer Hernando Cortez, who later conquered the Aztecs and started his own cocoa plantation, intending to grow currency.

It was Cortez who decided to add sugar to the bitter beverage. The beans were mixed with sugar, vanilla, nutmeg, cloves, allspice and cinnamon, creating a drink prized by Spanish nobility and a demand for the fruits of Cortez’s plantation.

The Spanish apparently kept chocolate a secret for 100 years before it became a delicacy worldwide.

Reichert and MacCrimmon have learned to bring chocolate when they are invited to friends' homes.

"We're around it so much that we don't think about it," MacCrimmon said. "But the first question is 'Where's the chocolate?'"

John Reichert and Elizabeth MacCrimmon make chocolate at the Chocolate Chisel that is as beautiful to look at as it is taste, and they're convinced it's good for you too. Photo by Sam Arendt