
REDEFINING “HOT” CHOCOLATE

BY SARAH LEECH-BLACK

Centuries before colonial Bostonians fervently showed their devotion to tea, an ancient civilization shared a similar fanaticism for a beverage of a different kind. Their treasured liquid was chocolate made from the precious cacao bean and they surely weren't dumping it in any harbors.

In 1502 Christopher Columbus landed at Guanaja. Soon he encountered and captured a Mayan canoe full of traded goods including what appeared to be almonds. Columbus concluded these “almonds” were of great value, noting that whenever the almonds fell, all stooped to hastily gather them, as if someone's “eye had fallen.”

The almonds were cacao beans. In Mesoamerican culture the bean was highly valued and was used as currency. The Mayans made a frothy chocolate beverage from the treasured bean and were sure to reserve some to offer their gods. Though the rich could afford to share the luxurious drink of deities, others diluted theirs with corn gruel to stretch what precious supply of cacao they could afford. Gradually, abundant local spices were added to the mixture, most often cinnamon and chili powder.

Over the ages the spice of chili peppers and the richness of cacao have met and mingled, from the ancient Mayan drink to the staple mole sauce of modern Mexican cuisine. Today the combination is an established flavor in chocolate making, though for many it is an undiscovered taste. An ideal blend is subtle, leaving a mild glow at the back of the throat rather than a burning sensation on the tongue. When the right balance is achieved the flavors enhance one another, igniting the understated flavor tones of *each*.

“It's about the level of harmony,” suggests Dana Zemack, a knowledgeable chocoholic and author of a chocolate blog called the Tasty Show. “That matters more than crazy flavor popping out of crazy places.”

At La Tene Chocolate, chocolatier Brendan Gannon makes the Chu'el bonbon, featuring three types of peppers and dark chocolate. Gannon explains the name's literal translation is “fire in the blood” but his interpretation is broader. He describes cacao as the “life essence” in ancient Mesoamerican society given its monetary, religious and cultural value.



Gannon first learned of Mesoamerican cultures through undergraduate anthropology courses. After graduating with an acting degree, Gannon tried several jobs including a two-year stint at L.A. Burdick Chocolate Café, where he often noticed much of his paycheck was being reinvested in chocolate. After experimenting with truffle making on his own he decided to open La Tene in December 2005.

“I try to bridge the gap between interesting modern flavors and the traditional methods of Europe,” says Gannon.

All of his artisanal bonbons feature a ganache filling enrobed in a thin layer of dark chocolate. Gannon uses organic ingredients when possible and tries to source many ingredients locally. The peppers he uses for the Chu'el are from Christina's Spice &

Specialty Shop, right down the street from his kitchen space in Somerville.

The bonbons of La Tene are hand-dipped. They are similar to truffles in that the fillings are made first, but differ by being square rather than round. To make a batch takes three days. First the ganache is made and infused with the particular flavors of the individual bonbon. The ganache then sits overnight, allowing it to cool and set properly so that it will hold its form when cut and dipped.

The next day Gannon spreads a thin layer of melted chocolate over the bottom of the ganache, a “foot,” to prevent the ganache from sticking to his work surface. Using a guitar cutter, a large board with numerous fine wires strung across, he

cuts the block of ganache into small, identical squares. Next, he loads the chocolate onto a Belgian dipping fork, a 16-prong contraption with alternating compressions.

Gannon shows off his fork proudly, an upgrade from the one he began with, allowing him to dip four chocolates at a time. He submerges the fork into a tub of carefully tempered chocolate. Making sure each square is coated, he pulls out the fork, tapping it on the side and scraping the bottom to remove any excess chocolate. The final touch may be a transfer or garnish, a hint of what is inside. A splatter of fiery red powder blazes the top of the Chu'lel. He says the red powder is also symbolic of the fierce reputation the Mayans have earned as a sometimes violent and "bloody" society.

While Gannon melds contemporary flavors and traditional methods together in his bonbons, he is not alone in his desire to add unusual flavors. While the Mayans preferred their chocolate spicy, when chocolate was introduced to the Spanish courts it was sweetened with vanilla to make it more palatable for European tastes. The preference for sweet flavors is still prominent in European chocolates.

Delphin Gomes, master pastry chef at the Cambridge School of Culinary Arts, estimates French chocolatiers have

been using chilies in chocolate for over 15 years. Over the summer he teaches a weeklong course devoted to chocolate making. He encourages students to play with all types of seasonings, herbs and spices, including chili peppers.

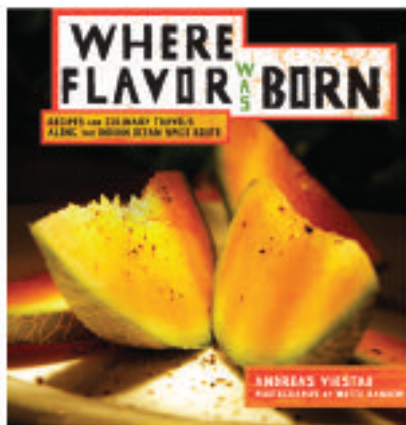
Gomes grabs a white cake box and reveals a pastiche of students' flavor trials. He picks up each truffle and takes a quick nibble, muttering what each one is: black tea with lemon, lavender with apricot jelly and "hot little hot peppers. Open your refrigerator and put that in," he suggests as a starting point to what you can do with chocolate. He chuckles recalling when he was using basil, though these days he's tinkering with thyme and oregano.

He is lighthearted about what goes into the chocolate but he acknowledges the delicate balance and discretion needed to make a palatable truffle. Different types of chocolate—dark, milk, white—lend themselves to particular flavors. While milk chocolate complements herbs, dark chocolate works better for spices like chilies, Gomes says, commenting how dark chocolate softens the hot peppers.

"When done in a subtle way, the chili deepens the chocolate," says Linda Hein, owner of The Chocolate Tarte in Somerville. Hein first experimented with the combination

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when a friend requested a spicy chocolate cake for her 50th birthday. Since then she has continued fiddling with chilies in her chocolate. Her fall offerings will feature a chocolate chili truffle, in addition to her spicy tarte and choco-chili cake.

For Hein's chili chocolate truffle she infuses the cream filling with ancho and chipotle chili powders, both smoky and mild peppers. In the Chu'lel truffle Gannon uses a blend of three peppers: mulato, catarina and pequin. The mulato is a large, brownish-black pepper with a mild, earthy flavor, similar to an ancho chili but sweeter. The catarina is a medium-sized red pepper with moderate, round heat. The seeds rattle when shaken. The bright red pequin, also known as a "bird pepper," is one of the smallest peppers but also one of the hottest. It is often used in hot sauces, including the Cholula brand, a staple condiment of local taquerias.

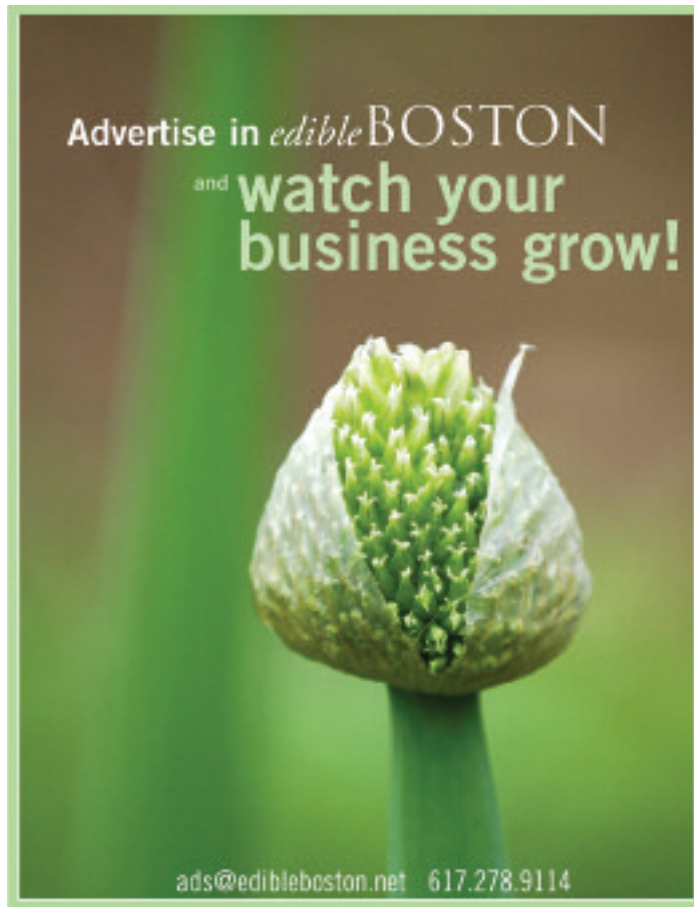
With hesitation I prepare to taste the Chu'lel, I crunch through the crisp outer shell and taste the creamy dark chocolate ganache. I move the chocolate around on my tongue to provoke the heat, but instead my tongue is bathed in the buttery dark cacao. Once the chocolate reaches the back of my tongue, I taste the tiniest flecks of spice, each one a granule of delicate heat. Mild sparks, but no burning fire. Once I've swallowed the morsel I continue to taste the tingling warmth of the chili, but it is washed over and around in the lasting essence of the dark chocolate.

For any chocolatier playing with fire, subtle spice should be the guiding principle in order to achieve the necessary harmonious combination. Otherwise, the combination becomes a gimmick, the flavor lost in sensational spiciness. Meld the flavors without scorching the palate, and it's wise to make an offering to the gods for good measure.

La Tene—Brendan Gannon hopes to open a storefront sometime in the future, but for now he distributes his chocolates to several local shops including Serene chocolate café in Cambridge, Joppa Fine Foods in Newburyport and Panazano market in Southborough. They also can be ordered online at www.latenechocolate.com.

The Chocolate Tarte—Hein's truffles are available at South End Formaggio or can be ordered online at thechocolatetarte.com.

Sarah Leech-Black is a freelance writer who loves to cook and eat. Besides her writing, she is most proud of her professional crepe-making skills and extensive knowledge of cheese. Much of her writing is seasoned by her culinary curiosities. She can be reached at sarahleechblack@gmail.com.



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