



How Sweet It Is

Chocololics are savoring the proliferation of chocolate cafés and lounges. By Karen M. Kroll

TWO OR THREE TIMES a week, Donna Wang, a Chicago-based assistant director in accounting, heads to the Moonstruck Chocolate Café near Chicago's Loop. There she indulges in one of her favorites, such as the Mexican Mocha chocolate drink or the Conquistador hazelnut praline truffle. "It's a treat for myself," she says.

Wang isn't the only one enjoying fancy chocolate truffles, pralines, and hot cocoa in one of the growing number of chocolate lounges and cafés that are opening across the country. Like coffee and cheese, chocolate has gone upscale. American consumers, once largely satisfied with Snickers, Milky Way bars, and other mass-market goodies, are gaining an appreciation for premium chocolate. "The American palate is exploring chocolate right now just like it did wine, coffee, and cheese in the near past," says Delmar Fuhrman, chief operating officer of Moonstruck Chocolate Company, based in Portland, Oregon.

As a result, while gourmet chocolate accounts for only about a tenth of the overall \$14 billion chocolate market, its sales have been growing at more than 10 percent annually, says Don Montuori, publisher at Packaged Facts, the publishing division of MarketResearch.com in Rockville, Maryland. In contrast, overall chocolate sales are

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need not cross the Atlantic to experience quality chocolate. "Americans and Belgians are some of the best chocolate makers in the world," says Mark Turner, president of the South Bend Chocolate Company, which has 20 cafés in the Midwest.

Makers of quality chocolate likely will remain busy, as consumers' interest shows no signs of abating. This is a true shift in the market, says Hollingsworth. "Chocolate is not a funky new mysterious type of ingredient" that consumers might abandon after the novelty wears off, he adds.

On the other hand, chocolate cafés and lounges are apt to be a "spotty trend," Montuori predicts. In contrast to Starbucks, chocolate cafés will probably not pop up on

locations in Chicago, for instance, a six-ounce bag of milk-chocolate-covered almonds runs \$10, while chocolate bars are \$2.50 each.

Even so, chocolate remains an affordable luxury for most consumers. "No one comes into a chocolate lounge and says, 'I'll either pay for my kid's college or I'll buy chocolate,'" says John Haugh, president of Mars Retail Group, owner of Ethel's. They can treat themselves without breaking the bank.

The growing popularity of premium chocolate and chocolate cafés has attracted the attention of some food-industry behemoths. Last summer, the Hershey Company acquired Scharffen Berger Chocolate

which is available only during certain times of the year, features fresh ingredients and handcrafted designs; the results run in excess of \$100 per pound. "There is a real return to desire for over-the-top things," Rothstein says.

At the same time, independent chocolatiers appear to be thriving. Moonstruck, for instance, currently has eight cafés in California, Oregon, and Washington, and will have more in California and Oregon by the end of the year, says Fuhrman. He credits the company's ability to create such specialties as handcrafted, beautifully sculpted truffles for its success. "That's not viable for large companies," Fuhrman notes.

Turner of South Bend Chocolate has add-

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has grown from zero to four stores since 2000, features exotic ingredients from around the globe, such as Hungarian paprika and Australian macadamia nuts.

Katrina Markoff, founder of this Chicago-based firm, says she's planning to open several more stores this year. Markoff says she has no interest in blanketing the country with chocolate cafés. Instead, one of

her goals, as grandiose as it may sound, is promoting "peace to the world through chocolate."

While that sounds like a tall order for a sweet treat to fill, Markoff explains her reasoning. She'll sometimes cajole customers into trying a combination of chocolate and other ingredients, such as olive oil and curry, that they haven't had before. "You

can see their whole face changing" as they realize that the taste is better than they anticipated, she says. Markoff hopes they'll apply that same open-mindedness in other, perhaps weightier, situations.

A better world through chocolate. How sweet it is. **EW**

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