FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS, we’ve been obsessed with chocolate. It is used as a source of cheer and consolation, a potent stimulant, a display of our affection. We’re so smitten that chocolate sales in the United States are forecast to reach a breathtaking $18 billion by the year 2011, topping even brewed coffee sales. We’ve even coined a word for our passion: chocoholic, meaning one who is fond of chocolate to the point of addiction, is an entry in the Oxford English Dictionary.

Our consuming passion for chocolate began with ancient Mesoamerican civilizations. The food we now adore comes from the Theobroma cacao tree, which grows wild in the tropical rain forests of Mexico, Central America, and South America. In Mayan and Aztec cultures, the seeds of the tree were roasted, crushed, and combined with chiles, ground almonds, cornmeal, hot water, and a variety of local herbs and spices. The resulting beverage, xocolatl (pronounced show-co-latl), was so highly prized, it was reserved solely for nobility and warriors.

Though Christopher Columbus introduced cocoa beans to Europe, it was Hernán Cortés who made them famous. In 1528, he returned to Spain from Mexico with his galleons stuffed with cocoa beans. After making culinary adjustments on the original xocolatl—omitting the chiles, adding sugar, vanilla, and aromatic spices—he introduced the beverage to King Charles V. The royal court of Spain was smitten, and the beverage became an overnight hit, a delicacy reserved for nobility and warriors.

Death by chocolate? Not if you listen to the latest research. More studies are showing that antioxidants in chocolate protect the heart, regulate immune response, and boost levels of happy brain chemicals called endorphins and serotonin. Some studies even suggest that certain kinds of chocolate have a higher concentration of antioxidants than either red wine or green tea.

But it’s not as simple as snacking on a Mars bar; the amount of antioxidants you get depends on the kind of chocolate you choose. A study by the USDA’s Agricultural Research Service detailed the total antioxidant capacity (TAC) and procyanidin antioxidant levels of six chocolate and cocoa products: natural unsweetened cocoa powder; Dutch-processed cocoa powder; unsweetened baking chocolate; semisweet chocolate baking chips; dark chocolate; and milk chocolate. The study found that natural unsweetened cocoa powder contains the highest TAC levels and procyanidins; milk chocolate has the lowest.

Processing also affects antioxidant content. Common cocoa powder (Dutch-processed) is made with a process called alkalinization, which reduces the acidity of chocolate and dramatically lowers the procyanidin content. Natural cocoa isn’t Dutch-processed, so it contains higher levels of antioxidants.

Generally, chocolates containing higher amounts of cocoa versus fat or sugar have higher procyanidin contents and greater antioxidant capacities. And, of course, once you combine cocoa with refined sugar, cheap oils, preservatives, and artificial flavors and colors, the quality of the end product dramatically decreases.

Best bets: use natural cocoa powder for beverages and baking, and snack on extra-dark chocolate—80 percent is best.

ancient aztec xocolatl Serves 4

4 cups milk or milk substitute
6 Tbs. honey
3 oz. dark bittersweet chocolate, chopped
¼ cup natural cocoa powder
½ tsp. ground cinnamon
¼ tsp. chipotle chile powder
¼ tsp. ancho chile powder
¼ tsp. vanilla extract
4 sticks cinnamon

1. Combine milk and honey in medium saucepan, and heat 1 to 2 minutes over medium heat, whisking constantly, until honey is dissolved.
2. Whisk in chocolate and cook 1 minute more, or until chocolate is melted.
3. Whisk in cocoa powder, ground cinnamon, and chile powders until combined.
4. Remove from heat, and stir in vanilla. Pour cocoa into 4 mugs, and add cinnamon stick to each mug. Serve immediately.

PER SERVING: 366 CAL; 10 G PROT; 16 G TOTAL FAT (9 G SAT FAT); 52 G CARB; 24 MG CHOL; 100 MG SOD; 4 G FIBER; 44 G SUGARS
Rich and velvety, sweet and soothing—what’s not to love about this classic confection?
Spanish nobility. In 1643, the Spanish princess Maria Theresa presented an ornate chest filled with cocoa beans to King Louis XIV of France as an engagement gift, and chocolate was thus introduced to the French court. Word of the bewitching beverage soon spread throughout Europe, and chocolate's popularity skyrocketed.

For more than 300 years, chocolate was consumed in the New World almost exclusively as a beverage. Then, in the 1830s, a British chocolate maker added additional cocoa butter to the ground beans to make a chewable candy. The confection was further refined—milk was added, filling procedures were developed—and the chocolate candy market was born.

In 1911 Frank and Ethel Mars began making the first mass-produced American chocolate, including M&Ms, the Mars bar, and a vast array of other sweets. The widespread availability of cheap chocolate further boosted its popularity. And an obsession was soon born.

But all was not well in the world of chocolate. The increasing demand prompted the rise of commercial farms where chocolate is grown and harvested in ways that exploit farm workers, damage the environment, and endanger children. Meanwhile, chocolate was becoming increasingly adulterated, with the addition of cheap fats, refined sugar, and artificial ingredients. A handful of American chocolate makers, determined to restore chocolate to its superior quality, began sourcing and producing organic and fair-trade chocolate, with no artificial ingredients.

Now, chocolate is returning to its original status of prized delicacy and gourmet confection. And as history repeats itself, we're finding that our passionate pursuit has a very happy ending.

Make this Valentine's Day the sweetest ever, with these high-quality confections

- Equal Exchange Organic Very Dark Chocolate Bars (71% cacao); Dark Chocolate with Pure Cocoa Nibs (68% cacao); Organic Panama Extra Dark Chocolate (80% cacao)
- Ithaca Fine Chocolates Art Bars Extra Dark 70% Chocolate; Dark Chocolate with Quinoa Crisp; Dark Chocolate with Cocoa Nibs.
- Shaman Organic Dark Chocolate with Ruby Raspberries; Dark Chocolate with Acai, Lemon & Orange Bar; and gift boxes.
- Sweet Earth Organic 8-piece Dark Chocolate Cremes Collection; 15-piece Dark Chocolate Truffles Collection; Vegan Ultimate Turtles; Dark Chocolate Hearts Gift Box in Hearts Galore or Hearts Triangle.
- Dagoba Organic Beaucoup Berries Bar (72% cacao); Prima Materia Bar (100% Cacao); Xocolati Bar (74% cacao).
- Yachana Gourmet Organic Jungle Chocolate with Pineapple; Jungle Chocolate with Brazil Nuts and Coffee Essence.

raw chocolate-banana cream pie with coconut-pecan crust  Serves 12

Here's a savory and satisfying rendition of the French bistro classic, without all the fat. Can also be made as four 4-inch individual tarts.

**CRUST**

1. Lightly coat bottom and sides of 8-inch glass pie pan with coconut oil. Set aside.
2. To make Crust: Combine pecans, dates, and 1 cup coconut flakes in blender; process until mixture is crumbly. Add half of cacao nibs, and pulse until mixture starts to form ball. Press mixture into pie pan to form crust, and place in freezer to chill.
3. To make Filling: Halve avocados, remove pit, and scoop out flesh. Combine avocado flesh, honey, maple syrup, coconut oil, vanilla, cocoa powder, and bananas in food processor. Process until very smooth and creamy, occasionally scraping sides of food processor with rubber spatula; add up to 1/2 cup warm water 1 Tbs. at a time, if necessary, to thin.
4. Transfer Filling to Crust, smoothing top. Scatter remaining 2 Tbs. coconut flakes and cacao nibs on top of pie. Arrange pecan halves around outside of pie. Chill 1 hour (or until firm) before serving.

**FILLING**

- 4 medium avocados, very ripe
- 1/2 cup raw, unfiltered honey
- 1/4 cup maple syrup
- 1 tbsp. vanilla extract
- 1 cup natural cocoa powder, raw if possible
- 2 medium bananas, very ripe
- 16 raw pecan halves
- 1/4 cup raw cacao nibs
- 1 cup plus 2 Tbs. unsweetened coconut flakes
- 1/4 cup soft Medjool dates, pitted and coarsely chopped
- 1 cup raw pecans
- 1/4 cup raw cacao nibs

PER SERVING: 357 CAL; 4 G PROT; 26 G TOTAL FAT (11 G SAT FAT); 37 G CARB; 0 MG CHOL; 9 MG SOD; 9 G FIBER; 23 G SUGARS