



The Healing Powers of Dark Chocolate

Learn how this nutritional superfood ramps up the flavor of savory dishes.

BY KAREN OLSON

RECIPES BY BETSY NELSON

If it sounds too good to be true, it usually is. Except in the case of dark chocolate.

Sure, chocolate's exquisitely decadent. But its primary ingredient, cocoa, has triple the antioxidants of green tea, helps reduce cholesterol and blood pressure, and improves insulin sensitivity.

Dark-chocolate bars — whether plain or spiked with ingredients like sea salt, bacon, nuts, and cherries — are now widely available. But as chef Jason French recently told *Bon Appétit*, “If you let go of what your preconception of chocolate is — which for 99.9 percent of the people is a candy bar — it becomes another culinary weapon [like cumin or butter] in your larder.”

Alice Medrich, who is credited with bringing the chocolate truffle to the United States in the 1970s, says that when you taste chocolate without all the sugar, you become aware of its deep, earthy, nutty, and fruity flavors. She compares chocolate to wine and says that, like grapes, chocolate has a terroir that reflects the taste of the soil and climate where it's grown.

“Sometimes you'll get some tropical fruit flavors or citrus flavors or cherry or even little hints of orange or coconut,” says Medrich, author of the cookbook *Seriously Bitter Sweet*. “There are hundreds of flavor components in chocolate, and they can go to the sweet or the savory really easily.”

In savory dishes, she says, the taste of chocolate is nuanced. She recommends adding chocolate to meaty sauces, like chili and spaghetti bolognese: “A tiny bit of dark chocolate melted into the sauce, or a little bit of cocoa, adds an undertone of flavor, something that people might not even identify as chocolate when eating the dish.”

Medrich also loves roasted cacao nibs — broken pieces of cacao seeds — and adds them to salads for a crunchy element. “It not only goes with some of the more bitter greens, but also with fennel, olives, and Parmesan,” she says.

With a little knowledge about how to shop for good chocolate, you can include it in your meals without guilt. In the next several pages, you'll find recipes for savory dishes; go to ELmag.com/darkchocolate for a trio of sweet treats.

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Quick & Easy

1 Add ground cacao nibs to ground coffee to make a hot mocha drink, or brew crushed cacao nibs alone for a hot chocolate drink.

2 Add 1 to 2 tablespoons of unsweetened cocoa powder to your

favorite smoothie recipe. (You may need to add a bit more liquid, since the cocoa thickens up the smoothie a bit.)

3 Add unsweetened cocoa powder to your favorite spice-rub recipe. Don't have

one? Try this: 1 tbs. smoked Spanish paprika, 1 tsp. unsweetened cocoa powder, 1 tsp. oregano, 1 tsp. marjoram, 1 tsp. brown sugar, 1 tsp. salt.

4 For a nutty crunch, toss cacao nibs into a salad

and dress with balsamic or red-wine vinaigrette.

5 Dip strawberries, pineapple, orange segments, or dried apricots in melted dark chocolate. Sprinkle with chopped pistachios or grated coconut, if desired.

(To melt chocolate, put it in a double boiler over barely simmering water and stir gently.)

6 Roll balls of chèvre in unsweetened cocoa powder, and serve with berries and nuts.

Chocolate Choices



Unlike money, chocolate actually grows on trees. The seeds found in the pods of the cacao tree (*Theobroma cacao*) are processed in different ways to create a variety of foods:

Cacao nibs — Cacao nibs, which taste somewhat like coffee beans, are the broken pieces of cacao seeds left after the outer shells are cracked and removed. Available raw or roasted, nibs are the least-processed edible form of chocolate.

Cocoa — Cocoa is created by grinding the nibs into a mash called “chocolate liquor.” Cocoa butter and unsweetened cocoa powder are products of the liquor.

Unsweetened baking chocolate (bitter chocolate) — Made nearly entirely of cocoa butter and cocoa solids, unsweetened baking chocolate is chocolate liquor in its solid form.

Sweet chocolate — Most of the chocolate we eat falls into this category. It always contains cocoa solids (usually in the form of cocoa powder). High-quality chocolate uses cocoa butter as the fat, while low-quality chocolate uses substitute oils. Sweet chocolate contains varying amounts of sugar, but in general, the higher the quantity or percent of chocolate, the lower the sugar. The FDA states that in order for chocolate to be called dark (or even bittersweet or semi-sweet), it must contain at least 35 percent cacao and less than 12 percent milk solids. Milk chocolate usually has about 10 percent cacao but can have up to 40 percent, depending on the maker. Most nutrition experts agree that chocolate with 60 percent cacao or higher has the most health benefits.

White chocolate — Contains at least 20 percent cocoa butter, as well as sugar and milk, but no cocoa powder. Because it doesn't contain any cocoa solids, white chocolate doesn't offer the same nutritional benefits as dark chocolate.



Roasted Butternut Squash With Cocoa-Bean Peppercorn Cream

Cocoa-infused cream pairs nicely with warming spices such as black pepper, cumin, and cinnamon, and it complements a variety of veggies, including carrots, sweet potatoes, and even green beans.

Makes four to six servings

- 6 cups cubed butternut squash
- 1 tbs. coconut oil, extra-virgin olive oil, or ghee
- 1 tsp. whole cumin seeds
- 1 cup heavy cream or coconut milk
- 1 tsp. black peppercorns
- 1 tbs. cacao nibs
- Salt to taste

Heat oven to 400 degrees F. Toss the cubed squash with the oil and cumin seeds, and roast in the oven for 15 to 20 minutes, until caramelized. While the squash is roasting, prepare the cream by bringing it to a low simmer in a small saucepan. Crush the peppercorns and cacao nibs with a heavy skillet and add to the cream. Allow the cream to barely simmer over low heat for 10 more minutes. When you are ready to serve, strain the cream and pour it over the squash. Sprinkle with salt to taste.



VIDEO EXTRA!

Learn how to make the traditional Mexican mole seen at right at ELmag.com/molevideo.



Chicken Mole

Mole is a traditional Mexican sauce that has many variations and usually takes hours to cook. This adaptation is quicker but still silky and flavorful.

Makes four to six servings

- 1 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 chicken, cut up into pieces (about 3 to 4 pounds)
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 3 cloves garlic, smashed
- 1 cup diced onion
- 1 cinnamon stick
- ¼ cup sesame seeds
- 3 tbs. ground ancho chilies or paprika
- 1 tbs. ground coriander
- 2 tbs. almond butter
- Zest and juice of one orange
- 2 cups chicken broth
- 2½ ounces Mexican chocolate (60 to 70 percent cacao content), coarsely chopped
- ¼ cup toasted pumpkin seeds, for garnish

Preheat the oven to 325 degrees F. Heat the olive oil in a large skillet. Season the chicken with salt and pepper, and sear for three to four minutes on each side. Transfer to a baking pan (reserving the oil and drippings), cover with foil, and roast for 15 minutes. For the sauce, add the garlic and onion to the drippings in the large skillet, and sauté until they begin to soften. Add the cinnamon stick, sesame seeds, and spices, and sauté until fragrant. Add the almond butter, orange zest and juice, and chicken broth, and bring to a simmer, stirring frequently. Cook until slightly thickened, about five to eight minutes. Stir in the chocolate. Lower the heat in the oven to 275 degrees F, and roast the chicken in the sauce for 10 minutes or until the chicken is done. Garnish with the pumpkin seeds, and serve over brown rice, quinoa, or millet.



Black Bean Chili With Chipotle and Dark Chocolate

Spicy and smoky chipotle pepper pairs well with dark chocolate.

Makes six to eight servings

- 1 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 cup diced yellow onion
- 1 cup diced carrots
- 1 cup diced red bell pepper
- ½ tsp. ground cinnamon
- 1 tbs. ground coriander
- 1 can (14.5 oz.) fire-roasted crushed tomatoes
- 3 cups vegetable broth
- 4 cups cooked black beans (or two 15-oz. cans, drained and rinsed)
- 1 to 2 chipotle peppers in adobo sauce, diced
- 2 ounces dark chocolate (80 to 85 percent cacao content), coarsely chopped

Heat the olive oil in a large saucepan over medium heat, and sauté the onions, carrots, and bell peppers until softened. Add the spices, and continue to cook until the vegetables are caramelized. Add the tomatoes with their juice to deglaze the pan. Then add the broth, beans, and chipotle peppers and bring the chili to a simmer for 10 to 15 minutes. Stir in the chocolate until melted. Serve the chili with a drizzle of Mexican crema, sour cream, or Greek yogurt.



NUTRITIONAL KNOW-HOW

■ Cocoa has strong antioxidant properties because of its flavonoids, which are phytochemicals also found in red wine, tea, and some fruits and veggies. Cacao nibs, organic cocoa powder, and high-percentage organic dark chocolate have the most flavonoids.

■ The darker the chocolate, the higher its nutritional benefits. For the best benefits, aim for 60 percent or higher cacao content.

■ Dark chocolate is associated with improved mood and pleasure because it boosts serotonin and endorphins in the brain. It also contains several minerals, including calcium, magnesium, and potassium.

■ Because it consists of stearic acid and oleic acid, cocoa doesn't raise blood cholesterol levels — and may even reduce them. Cocoa polyphenols are known to lower blood pressure, reduce the risk of blood clots, and increase blood flow in arteries and the heart. Multiple studies have also shown that dark chocolate reduces insulin resistance.

■ One study has shown that when chocolate is combined with milk — as in milk chocolate, chocolate milk, and chocolate ice cream — the milk binds to chocolate's antioxidants, making them unavailable for your body.



SHOPPING TIPS

■ Whenever possible, purchase chocolate that is 60 percent or higher cacao content. It contains more nutritional benefits, less sugar, and a deeper flavor.

■ Look for glossy or dark-brown chocolate. Stay away from chocolate that has white spots, small holes on the surface, or an overall grayish tone.

■ Select chocolate with a short ingredient list. Also, look for the terms “organic cocoa powder,” “organic cocoa butter,” and “organic cocoa” to indicate high-quality chocolate.

■ When possible, buy organic, fair-trade chocolate. Nonorganically produced cocoa may contain residues of lead and other potential toxins. The fair-trade label indicates that the farmers and workers who created the product were fairly compensated. ☎

Karen Olson is a Minneapolis-based writer and a frequent contributor to *Experience Life*.

All recipes were created by **Betsy Nelson** (a.k.a. “That Food Girl”), a Minneapolis-based food stylist and recipe developer.

WEB EXTRA!

Find the recipes for the trio of desserts pictured above, as well as the BBQ sauce at right, at ELmag.com/darkchocolate.



NOTE: Readers sometimes ask us why we don't publish calorie, carb, and fat counts with our recipes. We believe that if you're eating primarily whole, healthy foods (an array of sustainably raised vegetables, fruits, nuts, seeds, legumes, meats, fish, eggs, whole-kernel grains, and healthy fats and oils), you really don't need to stress about the numbers (which are often inaccurate or misleading anyway). We prefer to focus more on food quality and trust our bodies to tell us what we need. — Eds.