

2007 NYC Chocolate Show Review by Curtis Vreeland

Introduction

“Want to eat some opium?” A strange offer considering that opium was traditionally eaten by Chinese women as a fatal exit plan from unhappy arranged marriages, according to Pearl S. Buck’s novel, *Imperial Women*. Considering that the item in question was a dark chocolate truffle, it brought new meaning to the term “chocolate to die for.” Although it contained no opiates, but rather blood orange, smokey lapsang souchong and Chinese five spice, the truffle was very addictive. It was conjured up by Oliver Kita, an innovative chocolatier from Rhinebeck, NY.

And it can serve as an indicator of how creative contemporary nouvelle American chocolatiers have become, scouring the globe for inspiration and packing a multiplex of flavors, textures and sensorial stimulation into each sweet bite. Hello to multicultural, racy spice bazaar tastes; goodbye to heavy, sweet elements, as frumpy as Minnie Pearl’s hat.



Designers: Abaete & Capizzi; photo: Hall PR

The *Opium* bonbon was just one example of many sweet gems waiting for chocolate connoisseurs at the tenth annual New York Chocolate Show held at the Manhattan Pavilion, November 9 to 11. This show is part of Le Salon du Chocolat circuit that starts in Paris, passes through New York, then hops to Beijing and six locations in Japan. Lest we consider as impressive the size of the New York show with its 30,000 attendees, chocolate mania is off the Richter scale in Paris and Tokyo, where show attendance tops 150,000.

The event was kicked off on Thursday, November 8 as chocolate-themed fashions strutted down the catwalk of the Chocolate Fashion Show. This extravaganza elevates the art of chocolate to haute couture with the pairing of leading fashion designers with foremost chocolatiers and patissiers. One example was a model depicting a cacao flower using about 60 pounds of white chocolate, the collaboration between the designer Abaete and Per Se/Bouchon Bakery’s pastry chef Richard Capizzi.

Unusual Flavors Expand the Flavor Palate

If the “opium” flavor doesn’t seem sufficiently unusual, how about cheese? Jeff Shepherd, chocolatier at **Lillie Belle Farms** in Jacksonville, OR has taken chocolate into a new dimension by including blue cheese in his *Smokey Blue Truffle*. The cheese comes from Shepherd’s neighbor, Rogue Creamery, whose Smoked Oregon Blue was voted Best Blue Cheese in the World at the World Cheese Awards in London in 2004. Shepherd combines organic milk chocolate with the cheese and rolls it with toasted almonds. “Your first impression is of slightly smoked almonds; then the creamy smooth texture of the organic milk chocolate comes through with a finish of barely tangy cheese. No one flavor dominates the other,” he explained. “People may be skeptical at first; but after the first bite, they love it. Even my nine



year old daughter, Lillie Belle, will eat it.” Not one to rest on his laurels, Shepherd this month received the Grand Prize Scovie award at the Fiery-Foods & Barbecue Show for his *Cayenne Caramel* bar.

Chocolat Moderne has responded to America’s newfound adoption of ethnic foods. “I am tackling an entire ethnic cuisine,” said chocolatier Joan Coukos, a 2004 Next Generation Chocolatier competition winner. For this New York City-based chocolate maker, the ethnic cuisine is Greece, the home of her parents. “I chose ingredients that I loved in home-cooked meals and on trips to Greece.” Her *Greek Revival Assortment* includes kalamata olive, rose & pistachio, mastic & orange blossom, baklava, halva and ouzo. The Greek inspiration extends through the bonbon transfers (using images of Minoan serpents, Grecian key and palm motifs) and to the label (a reproduction of an image of a muse from a late classical-era vase).

Romānicos tapped into the health benefits of chocolate by launching a new line called the *Healthy Artisan Chocolate Bars*. At this show, Romānicos introduced twelve flavors, all based on 65% dark chocolate, the unusual ones being: *Mission Figs* (rich source of calcium, iron, magnesium, vitamin B6 and potassium); *Soy Beans & Sea Salt* (soy for reducing cholesterol & antioxidant; sea salt for minerals & nutrients); and *Wasabi Honey* (wasabi for anti-microbial properties; honey for anti-bacterial properties). “We tried to use good-for-you ingredients combined with dark chocolate,” says the Miami-based chocolate maker Alejandra Bigai.

The French chocolatier **Michel Cluizel** has released a real chocolaty black beauty, the *Cacao Forté* truffle with 99% cocoa mass ganache. “It’s for people who don’t want to eat a lot of chocolate, maybe one good piece. It fills your mouth with good chocolate flavor, not too overpowering, and doesn’t kill your tongue, but the flavor lingers for a long time,” says President Jacque Dahan.

For retro chocolate lovers who enjoy nostalgic flavors, the **DeBrand Chocolatier** booth was serving morsels of its *Sweet Potato Pie* chocolate bars. Made with crushed sweet potato, pecan brittle and milk and white chocolates, “it has been a hit with both men and women at the show,” reports DeBrand’s online marketing guy T.J. Ochoa.

Touched by the Starbucks Trend

Coffee flavored bonbons have a bad rap. Often victimized by mediocre ingredients, they linger unselected in the box of chocolate like wallflowers at a dance. Thankfully, the über premiumization of the bean has encouraged some chocolate makers to reevaluate coffee for a punch of flavor and a crunch of texture. It also marks the consumer’s taste tilt toward bitter flavors. A great example of this was debuted at the show by **J. Emanuel Chocolatier’s Coffee Truffles**. This truffle is a creation of third generation chocolatier Tad Van Leer with Chef’s Coffee, developed by Chef Craig Shelton from the Ryland Inn, New Jersey’s first four star restaurant. In addition to the coffee truffles, Emanuel has developed *Coffee Toffee* and *Creamers*, essentially a truffle on a stirring stick. “Rather than a flavored coffee, you take a great coffee and bring it to the level of flavor you want by stirring and melting the [truffle] stick,” explains Brian Blauvelt, Managing Partner for Chef’s Coffee.

Great Barrington, MA-based **Berkshire Bark** debuted a dark chocolate bar with roasted almonds, espresso toffee, coffee beans and caramelized cocoa nibs. The coffee beans come from a local roaster to insure freshness. “We selected a Vienna roast because its nutty quality and medium acid level doesn’t overwhelm the chocolate,” says the chocolatier/owner Kevin Schmitz. This bar joins *Mocha Buzz*, a milk chocolate version with toasted almonds, caramel and cocoa & coffee nibs.

Other chocolatiers at the show presenting coffee flavored confections included **Berkshire Bark Chocolates**, **Oliver Kita**, **DeBrand Fine Chocolates**, **John & Kiras** (combined with a shot of whiskey) and **Mars**. The latter company has released *TWIX Java* as a limited edition designed for people who like coffee shops. “It’s like having a coffee and chocolate break all in one,” says Marlene Machut, Director, Health & Science Communications for Mars.

Chocolate as Edible Art

A newcomer to the show was Emeryville, CA-based **Charles Chocolates**. One of the chocolatier's stunning new products is the *Tea Collection* packaged in an edible chocolate box with decorated lid. Developed in conjunction with the Berkeley teashop Teance, these tea-infused truffles are hand decorated with Chinese characters that identify flavors such as baochong, jasmine, osmanthus, lichee and oolong. The baochong, a fire-roasted oolong, is the imperial tea of Taiwan, according to chocolatier Chuck Siegel.



Another edible work of art is the *Donna Toscana* line of Tuscan style bars from **Donna & Company** based in Cranford, NJ. Inspired by her trip to Paul DeBondt's chocolate shop near Pisa, chocolatier Diane Pinder has transformed her bars into dark, shiny canvas displaying a gentle strewing of pumpkin seeds & chipotle pepper, caramelized pistachio & fleur de sel brittle, to name a few flavor combinations. The rich earth tones of the bars are offset by a sash of silk ribbon.

It appeared as though a swarm of chocolaty bees and ladybugs had alighted at the **John & Kira's** booth. The bees are flavored with basswood honey and salted caramel, complete with hand painted yellow jacket stripes. The ladybugs are available with garden mint (green), raspberry (red) and honey lavender (yellow) French-style ganache centers. These cute little critters will bring joy to any occasion. They also serve to underscore the chocolatiers' commitment to using fresh, natural and local ingredients, some of which are organic.



More Premium Organic Products

Organic chocolate was well represented at the show; a testament to this niche's improved quality and heightened demand. Organic chocolate is a hot trend, with US sales topping \$120 million this past year, according to the market research company Packaged Facts. This 65% sales increase compares very favorably to the 0.9% sales decline in the total chocolate market. Demand is expected to stay robust. Packaged Facts predicts sales to increase 42% per year and top \$200 million in five years. Chocolatiers selling bars with the USDA organic seal (guaranteeing that at least 95% of the ingredients are organic) included **Green & Black's** (the UK's top selling organic chocolate company), **Dagoba**, **Chocolove** and **Theo**. Other chocolate makers using 70% organic ingredients include **Lillie Belle Farm**, **Oliver Kita**, **John & Kira** and **Dina's Chocolates**. A practicing nutrition consultant, Dina Khader, developed her line of organic and fair trade chocolate to be both healthy (using only dark chocolate, some with antioxidant goji and green tea) and low in sugars, as many of her clients seek weight loss.

Single Origins Still Reign

Single origin chocolates are a niche that adds romance, distinction and geography to the love of chocolate. This past year **Amano Artisan Chocolate** has burst upon the scene offering über premium quality single origin chocolate that until now was available only from the hard to find Italian producers Domori and Amedei. Amano currently offers three selections, two from Venezuela and one from Madagascar. The *Ocumare Grand Cru* bar received an award for Outstanding New Product at the July 2007 NASFT Summer Fancy Food Show. The company is based in Orem, Utah's Silicon Valley and its owner, Art Pollard, brings his software engineering skills to bear. "Just as software rewrites

are expensive and time-consuming, you need to plan to do it right, from the start.” For Pollard, this means researching --- he took ten years --- and acquiring the appropriate equipment.

Curtis Vreeland’s Bio

Curtis Vreeland specializes in tracking emerging trends in the confectionery industry. With his over twenty-year experience in confectionery market research, he has published over two dozen articles and assisted companies to grow their business. Passionate about chocolate, Curtis has visited most of the major cocoa producing regions in the world. In 2004 he founded the Next Generation Chocolatier. Held every other year in NYC, this national competition’s mission is to acknowledge American artisan chocolatiers who are gifted and ready for prime time. He can be reached at cvreeland@vreelandassociates.com.

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