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Living the Sweet (and Lovely) Life

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Deep Dish

Houston's top toques reveal the answers to our burning questions.

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Sweet & **Savory**

Chocolate shows its versatility, thanks to local chefs willing to push the culinary envelope.

BY BETSY DENSON

A love of all things chocolate certainly isn't new. Evidence of the first cacao beverages dates back to 1900. B.C., that is. By the 19th century, we had figured out how to mold chocolate into bars.

The evolution continues as chefs mix sweet with savory, combining chocolate with meat, seafood and vegetables. Remember as a kid when you used to eat your M&Ms with your movie popcorn? You were on to something.



A seared scallop dish served at the Kris Bistro chocolate dinner includes both cacao butter and a milk chocolate foam.

RANDALL MURROW

SAVOR THE FLAVOR

Why bring chocolate out of the dessert realm? Why not, says Kris Jakob with Kris Bistro, the fine dining restaurant at Houston's Culinary Institute LeNôtre. A recent Guest Chef Dinner Series dinner featuring chef Philippe Schmit came about, he says, because they were looking for a challenge—and Schmit was more than up for the task.

The menu that Schmit came up with included canapés with pork belly, penja pepper and dark chocolate; corn tamales with braised veal cheeks and dark chocolate mole; a cured salmon napoleon with a dill ginger chantilly and cacao tuile; scallops in cacao butter; and roasted whole quail with a chocolate hazelnut grand veneur sauce.

"We wanted to create something exciting," says Schmit. "It took a while to write the menu. The chocolate mole sauce is a classic. So is the roasted quail and hazelnut sauce."

There were other items, like the cured salmon napoleon that were truly vanguard dishes. Schmit was enthusiastic about doing something with a Scandinavian influence and consulted a pastry chef to get that one right. The secret was the length of time spent marinating the salmon with the sugar, cocoa powder and coffee.

He said that the creamy texture of the dill ginger Chantilly and the crispness of the cacao tuile—a thin French-inspired cookie—gave the salty salmon dish a nice contrast.

"Chefs in New York and Dubai have called to ask for the recipe," he says.

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

There are simpler ways to infuse your entrées with chocolate—although the taste



might not be what you'd expect. Jakob likes to use a cacao spice mix in his pork rubs.

"It gives it a dark color outside and a roasted bitter taste," he says.

Likewise, in the seared scallop dish from the chocolate dinner, the cacao butter isn't there for sweetness.

"It has a high smoke point and gives you a better caramel finish," says Jakob.

Of course, chocolate lovers weren't disappointed with the dish because the scallops were served over a lasagna and then sprayed with a milk chocolate foam.

Executive chef Maurizio Ferrarese at Quatrro at the Four Seasons said his recent foray into chocolate was a no-brainer: "Everybody loves it."

He mainly stuck to desserts, but that didn't mean the dishes were any less inspired. Ferrarese said his favorite ones were the simplest, like the Ferrero Rocher—think Italian praline—served with Texas' Rebecca Creek Whiskey.

Ferrarese made two chocolate cakes, one with Texas chili peppers that had been cooked and caramelized.

"It gives the chocolate a kick," he says.

The second cake played a part in his mash-up of an affogato (Italian for 'drowned'), which usually involves a coffee-type beverage. Ferrarese made ice cream with stout beer, which he served with the chocolate stout cake and then poured more beer on top. Evolution indeed! ✧

RANDALL MURROW | COURTNEY LAINE

scan these pages
with Layar for chocolate tips from the chef and to get your chocolate cravings satisfied.

cravings

tools of the trade

In the mood to experiment with your own chocolate creations? We've got you covered.



START WITH QUALITY

All three chefs are fans of Verona Chocolate, which is headquartered in Dubai, but sources Belgian and Italian chocolate. For cooking, Ferrarese uses bittersweet dark chocolate (60-75% cacao), but the company also offers plenty of sweets ready for eating. A hot new chocolate is Blonde (a mixture of white and milk chocolate). Find Verona **online at verona.ae.**

BE A MELTING MASTER

You can't get chocolate too hot (over 115 degrees) or it will burn or separate. Sure, you could use the microwave method, but why not go old-school with a cool double boiler? Sur La Table has an all-clad stainless steel double boiler with ceramic insert. **$179.95. 1996 W. Gray St. 713-533-0400, surlatable.com**

DO YOU FONDUE?

Chef Kris Jakob says that the chocolate/bacon dessert fad is passé. But there are other crazes that are back in again, like fondue. Invite the neighbors and break out your red enamel cast iron fondue set from Crate and Barrel. It comes with eight plastic-handled chrome forks, **$39.95, 4006 Westheimer. 713-490-6400, crateandbarrel.com**

NAB THE NIBS

Cacao nibs are cocoa beans separated from their husks and broken into small bits. Chef Maurizio Ferrarese uses them in the sauce for his short ribs. You can find Scharffen Berger Cacao Nibs at Whole Foods. **$8.95, six-ounce pouch; $47.70, six-pack. 2955 Kirby Drive. 713-520-1937, shop.scharffenberger.com**

DRINK YOUR DESSERT

Sometimes you want to get your chocolate fix with a minimum of effort. Don't eat your custard pudding; have it as your morning or evening beverage instead. Chocolate Crème Brûlée coffee is available at Bering's. **$11, 1-lb. bag. 3900 Bissonnet St. 713-665-0500, berings.com**