



## THE WORLD'S BEST CHOCOLATE SHOPS

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April 19, 2007



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### Sweet boutiques

Chocolate isn't what it used to be. Over the past 20 years, true chocolate lovers have moved far beyond sickly sweet five-pound boxes of milk chocolates into a rarefied world where chocolate, like cheese and gourmet coffee, is considered an artisanal art form and an affordable indulgence. Ingredients, techniques and presentations can be obsessively discussed for hours without the snobbery sometimes associated with wine.

Joan Steuer, who founded Chocolate Marketing, LLC in 1987 to pinpoint chocolate trends (an enviable job for sure), waxes poetic about the artistry of blue-ribbon chocolatiers. "They use the chocolate much like an artist uses paint," she said. "It's their vehicle of expression, and you're tasting their passion. How wonderful to taste the signature imprint of a living artist." Steuer says that chocolatiers live a lonely life of 20-hour days struggling with their craft, so they love to talk to their customers and soak up their appreciation.

Lean over the cool glass cases of the world's top chocolate shops, and you'll see that today, chocolatiers take pride in presenting "single-source" chocolates in which the cocoa comes from a single country, region or individual farm, with prices rising in lockstep with rarity. Is northern Ecuadoran better than southern Venezuelan? Is a Madagascar blend more earthy than a Sumatran? The only way to decide is to sample, sample and sample some more.

Much of the credit for introducing Americans to haute chocolate goes to La Maison du Chocolat, which has been exporting its high-end delicacies from a single Parisian factory for more than 30 years. Its revered founder, Robert Linxe, has taught many of the world's best chocolatiers, and La Maison sets a benchmark for both quality and price (about \$75 per pound) that makes high-quality chocolate accessible to the eager shopper. Markus Bohr, noted pastry chef at Singapore's [Shangri-La Hotel](#), is a big fan of the Linxe touch and recommends that students of chocolate sample the "Initiation" chocolate package, a 20-piece introduction to the diversity of chocolate flavors, available in the shops or online for \$52.

So when you set out to explore the world's chocolate shops, how do you know when you've found a good one? Sylvie Douce and François Jeantet, producers of "The Chocolate Show," a traveling exhibition of the

latest tastes and trends in chocolate, say a first-rate chocolatier will feature refrigerated cases that keep the goods at 58 to 62 degrees with low humidity. The chocolate should have a high-gloss sheen, and the outer coating should be extremely thin and give way with a noticeable snap. Travelers will note distinctions among countries. Truffles from France, for example, tend to be firmer and denser than those of Switzerland, which melt more quickly. American chocolatiers are far more likely to use colors and artistic screen printing and are less likely to produce many varieties of chocolate bars, which are popular in Europe and which travel well.

Spain, where chocolate first arrived in Europe, has recently become an avant-garde hotbed of chocolate innovation and an essential stop on the chocolate circuit. In Barcelona, just about anything, including pork cracklings, can be covered in a rich dark chocolate blend. Markus Bohr is especially fond of the **Barcelona** chocolatier Oriol Balaguer. “He’s creative at a very high level,” said Bohr. “A bit like Phillippe Starck, only better tasting.”

And just as chocolate sauces (variants of traditional Mexican moles) have found their way into duck and even lobster recipes in trendy American restaurants, bizarre chocolate infusions are also becoming more prevalent, according to trendspotter Joan Steuer. She cites Kristy Choo at Jin Patisserie in Venice, **California** as one infusion innovator (think clove, cinnamon, pandan and chrysanthemum), and she even recalls an experiment by Robert Linxe in which chocolate was combined with tobacco. “I don’t know if he’d ever sell it,” said Steuer, “but it tasted good!” Steuer also notes that our growing fascination with chocolate is leading to everything from chocolate-based cosmetics and skin-care products to candles and incense.

Travelers may wonder if high-end chocolate will suffer on a long journey home. While all our experts agree that chocolate is best eaten immediately, it can travel if you take every possible precaution to keep it at a cool, stable temperature. You’ll know you’ve failed if your chocolate starts to turn white, which indicates that the cocoa butter has separated out of the blend. Ask the chocolatier to pack it for travel, never put it in your checked luggage, and avoid items such as truffles (named after their similarity in appearance to the **pricey fungi variety**) that contain large amounts of cream or butter. Steuer recommends bringing easy-to-pack bars home and packing more fragile items and beautiful boxes with bubble wrap so they won’t get dented. “Fine chocolates are like jewels,” said Sylvie Douce. “Take care of them!”

Read on to explore a collection of the world’s finest boutique chocolate shops, as recommended by our expert interviewees.



### **San Francisco** **Recchiuti Confections**

**At this Ferry Building favorite, Michael Recchiuti practices the true art of chocolate, even inviting local artists to design collections and letting his wife craft the Asian-inspired packaging. “Be sure to try the champagne truffles,” said Joan Steuer. She also recommends the key lime apples and key lime pears, which are paper-thin fruit slices that have been soaked in key lime juice, dried, and then dipped in dark bittersweet chocolate.**

*For more information: One Ferry Building, Shop 30; 415-834-9494; [www.recchiuti.com](http://www.recchiuti.com)*