Chocolate Tasting Guide

How to Taste Chocolate: A Chocolate Tasting Guide

Enjoying high-quality chocolate is an experience like no other. The flavors are rich and complex, and there is a large variation in flavors among various chocolates. In fact, the flavor compounds found in dark chocolate exceed those in red wine. For this reason, we have put together this chocolate tasting guide to assist people new to the world of chocolate tasting.

Chocolate is best enjoyed when it is savored slowly and not quickly eaten. Chocolate tasting is not unlike wine tasting. Each type of chocolate bar contains its own set of unique flavor profiles. Since the cacao bean is the source of all chocolate (as grapes are the primary source of wine), its flavors can be imparted by a multitude of variables, such as topography, weather (e.g. rainfall, amount of sun, etc.), soil conditions (e.g. type, nutrient content, drainage properties, etc.), post-harvesting processing (e.g. fermenting, roasting, etc.), and of course genotypic properties. With so many variables affecting the flavor of just one chocolate bar, it’s important to taste chocolate carefully so that you can extract the fullest flavor potential. If you follow this chocolate tasting guide, you will quickly and easily be able to experience the wonders of fine quality chocolate in no time.

Chocolate Tasting Guide: The Steps

First, it is imperative to taste chocolate in an environment free of distractions and background noise, such as television, music, or conversations. Being able to concentrate as intently as possible will enhance flavor detection because your mind needs to focus on one task and one task only. If you like, you can keep a copy of this chocolate tasting guide with you for reference. It is often a good idea to have a piece of paper or notebook handy for you to take tasting notes in. Such things as smells, flavors, and textures should be noted.

Your palate should be clean. This means that your mouth should not contain residual flavors from a previous meal. If necessary, eat a wedge of an apple or piece of bread since these foods will wipe out all preexisting flavors without imparting their own. After all, chocolate should not taste like lasagna or beef burgundy. Water, especially sparkling water, also works as a palate cleanser.

Make sure that the piece of chocolate is large enough to accommodate the full evolution of the flavor profile. A piece too small may not allow you to detect every subtle nuance as the chocolate slowly melts. The important thing to remember is that flavor notes gradually evolve rather than open in one large presentation. Ideally, the beginning of the length (the time it takes for the chocolate to melt) will be different from the middle and the finish, so it is important to discern how the flavor evolves from beginning to end. 10g should be a minimum starting point.

Never taste cold chocolate. If it is stored in a wine cooler, allow the chocolate to rest at room temperature before tasting. Why? Cold temperatures will hinder your ability to detect the
flavor. Some advise even rubbing the chocolate briefly between your fingers to coax out the flavor.

Crackers, apples, and lukewarm sparkling water works well as palate cleaners between chocolate tastings.

Look at the chocolate. The surface should be free of blemishes, such as white marks (called bloom). Observe the manufacturer’s job at molding and tempering. Is the chocolate afflicted with air bubbles, swirling, or an uneven surface (results of settling after molding), or is it clear of such defects? Also, the bar should have a radiant sheen. A matte surface is usually an indication of poor molding but will not affect the flavor. Next, note the color. Chocolate comes in a brown rainbow of multifarious tints, such as pinks, purples, reds, and oranges. Some chocolates may even look black or so dark that at first glance a tint may be indiscernible. But probe further and hold the chocolate at different angles. What do you see?

Smell the chocolate. The aroma is an important component of flavor. Inhaling the fragrance and noting its profile will prime the tongue for the incoming chocolate. It further engages the senses and gives you a chance to compare how similar or different aroma and flavor are.

Break the piece in half. It should resonate with a resounding “SNAP!” and exhibit a fine gradient along the broken edge. If you hear a “THUD” chances are good that either the chocolate was too warm or it was improperly tempered.

Place the chocolate on the tongue and allow it to arrive at body temperature. Let it melt slowly. This step is crucial, for it allows the cocoa butter to distribute evenly in the mouth, thereby muting any astringencies or bitterness of the chocolate. Chewing immediately will release these properties and might offend the palate.

Study the taste and texture. As the chocolate melts, concentrate on the flavors that unfold on the tongue. It is important to notice how the flavor evolves from beginning, middle, to end, and how the flavor exists in the finish (after the chocolate has melted).

Chewing is optional, but do not chew more than three times. Since the cocoa butter has had time to coat the mouth, chewing just may release even more flavor components. Remember, we’re tasting and not eating.

Now the chocolate is nearing its finish. How has the flavor evolved? Is the chocolate bitter? Heavy? Light? Was the texture smooth, creamy, dry, or grainy? Do any changes in texture and flavor occur? Take note of how the chocolate leaves the palate and slips into its finish. Does a strong reminder linger in your mouth, or does it quickly vanish?

**Chocolate Tasting Guide: Comparing Multiple Types of Chocolate**

If you wish to conduct a taste test involving different varietals, or even different manufacturers’ interpretations of the same origin, it is important that we cover this in our chocolate tasting guide as well. You may want to consider the following:

1. Have a palate cleanser nearby. As mentioned, a wedge of an apple or a piece of bread will suffice, since they wash out all residual flavors without imparting their own.
2. A glass of water is also important. This will also achieve the same effect as a palate cleanser but will further wash out all contaminants in the mouth. Sparkling water works particularly well for cleansing your palate between tastings.

3. Do not use steps 2 and 3 in isolation. Use them both. The apple and bread will clear the palate while the water will wash remaining contaminants away. Water will also quench the inevitable thirst that chocolate tasting can cause.

4. Usually, it is wise to start from the lower percentage and work your way up. However, some chocolates can be extremely strong even at a lower level and therefore overpower all others. Further, if multiple chocolates are of the same percentage, it is important to research which one is inherently stronger. For example, if you are tasting a 70% Arriba and a 70% Madagascar, the Arriba should be tasted afterwards because of its hearty and bold character. Factors such as these make adequate palate cleansers all the more imperative.

5. If you are participating in a taste test, it is important to wait an adequate amount of time between chocolates. Again, the residual flavor can linger for a long time and hence contaminate the following chocolate. Use this waiting period to take notes and carefully analyze each chocolate so that you can compare sufficiently.

Chocolate Tasting Parties

Chocolate tasting parties are not only a great way to share your favorite chocolate with friends but to learn about taste and the many possible flavors that chocolate provides.

Chocolate tasting and chocolate tasting parties are a growing phenomenon among chocolate lovers. We will briefly cover chocolate tasting parties in our chocolate tasting guide.

Chocolate tasting parties are a great way to educate your chocolate palate as well as become more knowledgeable about the chocolate you are eating. So get some friends together, buy a selection of good-quality chocolate. It is a good idea, if you are conducting a tasting, to add some educational background to the party. For example, do some research regarding chemical properties, growing regions, botanical facts, medicinal uses, and historical significance. Cacao has a long and intricate history, so it is fun delving into (and ultimately sharing) its rich past. You may also want to find out what information you can about the manufacturer. How long has it been in business? What are its goals? What types of chocolate does it like to manufacture? Most people are usually impressed by such an illustrious history and will ultimately admire your knowledge of the subject and the more that you and others know about a chocolate; the more you can savor not only its flavor but its rich history as well. Most importantly, don’t be pretentious! People will be turned off to chocolate if you act like a “snob.”

As you hold your chocolate tasting party, keep this chocolate tasting guide handy. Perhaps you might like to give each person in your party a copy of this chocolate tasting guide. Make the chocolate tasting party fun and be jovial. After all, there is not much in this world that brings about as much happiness and passion as chocolate. If you follow the advice in this chocolate tasting guide, you will engage participants and cause them to appreciate the complexities of chocolate even more.
Manufacturing Chocolate & Cocoa

On Plantations and Farms in the Tropics

- Cacao Pods
  - Remove Contents
  - Cacao Beans + Pulp
  - Ferment 2-8 Days
  - Dry

- Dry Cacao Beans
  - Roast
  - Shells
  - Nibs
  - Grind, Refine
    - Chocolate Liquor
    - Cocoa Butter
  - Press
    - Cocoa Cake
    - Pulverize
    - Cocoa Powder

In Factories

- Conch
  - Cool, Form
  - Chocolate

Vanilla, lecithin (sugar) (milk solids)