

Sweet like...

Rich, dark and smooth;
comforting, addictive and
a source of pure pleasure.
I'm addicted to chocolate,
confesses James Fox.

Photograph by Bela Borsodi

Winfield House, the US Ambassador's residence in Regent's Park, was an American officers' club when I was a child in the early Fifties, with uniformed Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra types playing the banks of slot machines and drinking a lot of post-war Bloody Marys. *South Pacific*, when it came, was no mystery to me. My American father, a lawyer for the US Navy, used to take me to Winfield House at weekends when he had parental visiting rights – and this meant catch-up treats. We ate shrimp cocktail with pink sauce, and steaks; we ate Melba toast. He had given up Bloody Marys after a hard cure; they had deprived him of the girl he loved – my mother. So we liked the same things: ginger beer, but most of all chocolate, of which he consumed large amounts.

Winfield House is where I experienced my first real chocolate hit – that Burroughsian warm thud in the brain, the circuits of pure pleasure, lit up in this case from spooned American chocolate ice cream. These were still days of severity and rationing in England, but

my father had access to another little headwater of the Marshall Plan – the Navy PX (post exchange), near Grosvenor Square. Here you could buy Hershey Bars – unknown in England but so delicious and precious, with their almonds and special flavour (which, we now discover, contains only 28 per cent cocoa solids). The Aladdin's cave of the PX put me far beyond my contemporaries, who had never tasted Dentyne chewing gum, nor seen a battery transistor radio – like the one that nurtured me on the roots of rock 'n' roll. So, chocolate was father-love and plenty, and fed my already developed sense of exile from my native America.

Then came my father's return to America and my departure to boarding school, aged eight. Everything changed. There, like the Aztecs and Mayas, we prized chocolate above any other commodity. It was the antithesis of cold, hunger and bad food; a consolation for love betrayal by parents, the ersatz hug. My friend, the writer Francis Wyndham, whose father, amazingly, had fought at Lucknow and

had kept a dusty slab of chocolate sent in gratitude by Queen Victoria, remembers being sent Bendicks Bittermints in the mid-Thirties by his mother when he was ill at prep school. They were entrusted to the headmaster's wife, Mrs Pike. When he was well enough to ask for one, he was told they couldn't be found. Mrs Pike, it turned out, had eaten them all. "I can't really say I never got over it," he told me.

The small print on Cadbury's Crunchie bar stated that dissatisfied customers could seek a replacement. I don't recognise now the self-control with which I mailed back two-thirds of a Crunchie – which I had doctored to look hollow and naturally spoilt – in the knowledge that I might get three bars by return of post. The replacement bars duly came, however, until Cadbury got wise to this address in Berkshire.

Parents had their own chocolate. Bendicks reminds me of a snobbery about it, which lasted through my childhood – only dark chocolate was acceptable. There was a bar called



Sporting and Military, also made by Bendicks, which was used out hunting and which, for certain women, had the flirtatious cachet of being “masculine”. This snobbery extended to the dark Bournville, which, to me, was a truly awful bar – over-roasted, over-sugared and greasy – but this didn’t seem to matter.

The best dark chocolate I ever tasted was at Rivoire, a café on the Piazza Signoria in Florence, where they sold a little deep tub coloured a beautiful Chinese lacquer red, containing dark, almost treacly chocolate, with a gritty texture and a little spoon to eat it with. Otherwise, my grown-up consumption until recently was confined to gas-station snacks of Ritter Sport for the hazelnut factor and sometimes a slag Cadbury Fruit and Nut. Whenever I bought a Cadbury bar – though I could never face a plain one – I thought of the discovery I made when writing about the playwright Joe Orton, and wondered why I had bought it.

Orton and his boyfriend and assassin Kenneth Halliwell worked in a Cadbury

factory when they were learning to write, and claimed that they unloaded all their bodily wastes and reproductive fluids on to the production line on a regular basis. Since Orton was a packer and Halliwell a clerk, this seems unlikely: they also gave out Cadbury bars as presents. But outrageous bad taste, to coin a phrase, was Orton’s inspiration, much of it a reaction to the suffocating genteelness that surrounded him in his hometown of Leicester. He had it in for the prissy munching of “assorted chocolates” with that vacant fish-eye stare. He believed that there was real violence and immorality behind the English lace curtain. In *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, when the Dadda is dying upstairs from a kicking administered by the amoral Mr Sloane, his daughter Kath, cosy and sexually insatiable, says, “I’d take him up a toffee, but he only gets them stuck round his teeth.”

I am now addicted to chocolate, but only since I gave up drinking a year ago. Like my father before me, I have found consolation and, apparently, a replacement of vitamin B, not in Hershey’s, but in the latter-day dark chocolate bars of high quality and high cocoa content. Green & Black’s’ incomparably delicious organic chocolate is what I buy: dark Raisin & Hazlenut, Maya Gold and recently the astonishing drug that is Almond – whole organic almonds in a milk-chocolate bar. At first I bought two or three bars at a time; now I never leave the supermarket with fewer than six. I can usually do these 100g bars in one go. A day without one never goes by. In fact the *reason* for eating meals at all now is to get to the chocolate afterwards. I thought I was overdoing it, particularly regarding my working intake of chocolate biscuits, but got some consolation from the writer Will Self, who gave up all intoxicants some years ago. “How many do you eat >

at a time?" he asked. "Above five," I said. "Five?" he replied, "I eat 23."

I have thought about chocolate addiction – there's no question it is addictive – a good deal. Strangely, Self, who is well grounded in pharmacology, sees the addictive element merely as the chocolate-eater's subconscious sense of feeling loved, of "the warm embrace" as it melts in the mouth. It is proved beyond doubt that you don't get the same craving or buzz from other sweets, so it's not just about sugar. Sadly, it's not down to any trace of psychoactive drug either, though chocolate contains phenylethylamine, similar to amphetamine. Interestingly, it also includes anandamide, a chemical that mimics the effects of marijuana – though in minute concentrations. There are, however, noticeable amounts of caffeine in chocolate.

But I believe that the addiction has much to do with sheer pleasure. The crucial smoothness comes from the cocoa butter – absent in most popular chocolate bars – which melts, in the case of dark chocolate, just below body temperature, giving an immediate rush. The British Nutrition Foundation agrees – the only biological explanation for craving chocolate is that it induces the release of brain endorphins, the body's own opiate. Good chocolate is rich in antioxidants, it is a hedge against heart disease and it needn't make you fat (Lester Piggott lived on it). A bar of French Valrhona, for example, has one tenth of the calories of mass-produced chocolate.

I have noticed, in conversations with women on this subject recently, that chocolate releases a strange lack of inhibition. There is a kind of abandon in talking about it, of shameless confessions and expressions of desire, a language usually confined to sex or, specifically, telephone sex. A female acquaintance described a chocolate she had eaten from L'artisan du Chocolat on Lower Sloane Street, in this case a chocolate called Passion, filled with passion fruit and pear *pâte de fruit*. "I thought I'd died and nearly gone to heaven," she said, "It was like... Oh God... Oh my God. I nearly had an orgasm. I had to sit down and gather myself." This chocolate does have a suggestive, intrusive quality to it, a kind of time delay as the passion-fruit jelly announces itself, but by that point, I honestly felt it improper to communicate my own appraisal by telephone.

Compare this to the language used in the latest jewellery collection of Boucheron, the work of its creative director, Solange Azagury-Partridge. It's called L'Eau à la Bouche. Azagury-Partridge has created a gold the colour of mid-dark chocolate, and fashioned rings in the forms of parted lips, partly bitten chocolates, and necklaces and bracelets "to be nibbled and licked". As the brochure

proclaims, "precious metal melts at the edges and dribbles down the finger"; the jewellery "slides, smears and drips onto the body. It arouses a craving, then satiates it with gold." It turns out that Azagury-Partridge wrote most of this herself. "There's an edible element in jewellery," she says, soberly. "Gemstones look like fruit pastilles. When you love something or find it attractive, you want to smell it or touch it or lick it. Chocolate is such a female obsession in a way, with the same sensations and chemical reactions as falling in love. It can't be minimal, restrained or polite. It's not what chocolate is. Chocolate is kind of rude."

A woman I sat next to recently told me that she and her friends had always taken seriously something they had read in a Jilly Cooper novel years ago, remembered as "never trust a man who leaves a bar of chocolate half eaten". "My girlfriends and I have used this as a measure of men for years, and it has always proved true," she explained. In fact, what the character in Jilly Cooper's 1978 novel *Prudence* said was, "I realised there was a half-eaten bar of chocolate in the glove compartment. I ought to have seen the red light then. People who don't gobble up a bar of chocolate in one go have too much self-control." And not enough appetite, according to this woman. A young friend of mine told me that this line had also stuck in his memory when he was at Oxford, which is surprising for a student who went on to get the second-best First of his year in English. Something about it stung him and he kept a half-eaten KitKat in his cupboard, perhaps to prove his own self-control. One day, he was visited by a very beautiful young female student, whom I also know. As she reached for the KitKat in the cupboard he couldn't bear to tell her that it was over a year old; he couldn't explain. "This is rather stale isn't it?" was all she said.

After 150 years of mass production, so much of the cocoa and cocoa butter had been squeezed out of popular chocolate in England in favour of sugar, vegetable fat and powdered milk, that the EU, in the mid-1980s, questioned whether most of it could even be labelled "chocolate". They wanted to call it "vegetate". In Britain, the backlash was started mostly by women. In 1986, Chantal Coady (who founded Rococo Chocolates on the King's Road in 1983) and Nicola Porter established The Chocolate Society, with the aim of alerting the populace to the cocoa content in bars. They now think this may have been misleading: you can have high cocoa content and still have bad chocolate. The key elements are, in fact, high-class beans, skilled processing and the balance of ingredients, examples of which you can now find just about everywhere.

Josephine Fairley produced the first organic bar with 70 per cent cocoa, when she established Green & Black's in 1991. Heroically, she rescued Mayan growers in Southern Belize from the multinationals and put them back on their rainforest plots to cultivate their ancient and tasty criollo beans instead of the hybrid bean normally used for mass production. The result is the Maya Gold bar, furnished with Fairtrade endorsements.

Since then, there has been an explosion of *grand cru* and gourmet chocolate – you can check the top ten bars against fierce reviews at Seventypercent.com. And, in the last year or so, some very high-quality chocolate shops have opened in London – foreigners, according to one maker, having spurned London until now because it was thought the English had no taste. It turned out that we were just used to such bad chocolate that we were open to anything. The aforementioned L'artisan du Chocolat, with its Irish chocolatier Gerard Coleman and Pierre Marcolini from Brussels, makes fresh chocolates – as does recent addition Maison du Chocolat in Piccadilly. This is a shop of startling French chic, with young, demure women assistants, shiny chocolates and beautiful, architectural packaging all laid out among marble and wood décor, with the sobriety and seriousness that only the French can bring to something as frivolous as chocolate. It has the perfect little geometrical pastries only found in France and the lightest *marrons glacés* I have ever tasted. Rococo in the King's Road, by contrast, is like the sweetshop of childhood dreams, with multicoloured bags of jellybeans and its incomparable organic bars of chilli pepper (a Mayan preference) basil and lime, and cardamom – as well as a bar entirely manufactured from bean to block in Grenada, which tastes of woods and molasses.

Today, the room where I work is stacked with chocolate samples – enough for generous Easter presents for the entire 101st Airborne and their families. I have tasted most of them and in the end I go for the bars and not the ganache-filled chocolates, of which I can eat only two or three before feeling overwhelmed with excess – though L'artisan du Chocolat has recognised this and makes their chocolates small to combat "palate fatigue". With bars, you can taste the source and variety cleanly and, more importantly, as someone observed of the chocaholic Marquis de Sade, you can "wolf it down in frightening quantities". My hoard even includes bags of chocolate pastilles, used decoratively in *haute cuisine*, from Au Comptoir des Chefs in Paris – what to do with these? I could make a Faubourg Pavé, or a Gâteau Saint-Honoré or Petits Pots à la Bergamote. But then, what to have for dessert? ■