

Chocolatiers stimulate local economy via sweets

Success by truffles, brownies and more

Kirsten Harrington / Correspondent



Chocolate Myracles' red, heart-shaped truffles are made with Coeur d'Alene Wine Cellars No. 6 Red Wine and Belgian bittersweet chocolate.

Where to get your chocolate fix

The Chocolate Apothecary, 621 W. Mallon Ave., (509) 324-2424,
www.chocolateapothecary.com

OMO Chocolates, 224 S. Washington St., (509) 838-7788

Chocolate Myracles, (509) 995-1271,
www.chocolatemyracles.com

Boehm's Chocolates, River Park Square, (509) 456-8466,
www.chocolates-flowers.com

Godiva Chocolatier, River Park Square, (509) 835-3941,
www.Godiva.com

Spokandy, 1412 W. Third Ave., (509) 624-1969,
www.spokandy.com, with locations in Northtown Mall, Spokane Valley Mall and Ironwood Center in Coeur d'Alene

Local chocolate events

Fourth annual Chocolate Walk in downtown Coeur d'Alene: Friday, 5 to 8 p.m. Businesses along Sherman Avenue will hand out free samples of chocolates. Look for the balloons to find participating merchants. Spokane's Chocolate Myracles will sell chocolates at Barrel Room No. 6 wine bar, 503 E. Sherman Way.

25th Annual Chocolate and Champagne Gala: Feb. 27, 6:30 p.m. to midnight. Event features chocolate fountain, truffles, brownies and more. Hors d'oeuvres and dancing included. Tickets are \$50 a person. Call (509) 343-5053 for more information.

The economy may have soured, but folks haven't stopped indulging in something sweet. According to Spokane area chocolatiers, the economic downturn has not substantially affected chocolate sales.

"People want to treat themselves since they are cutting back on other things," said Karalee Borquin, manager of The Chocolate Apothecary in the Flour Mill.

One of the store's strongest sellers is the Chuao Spicy Maya bar, Venezuelan chocolate with chili peppers and cayenne.

Marta Johnson, owner of Spokane's OMO Chocolates, reports that sales are steady. She has made a effort to make her chocolates affordable for her customers by offering five truffles for \$10.

Her location near Vino! and Saunders Cheese Market has been beneficial, as chocolate goes well with wine and cheese. People who are shopping for dinner parties hit all three stores.

"People come in and feel relaxed. They take a chocolate break and their blood pressure drops by 10 points," Johnson laughed. Her chocolates are made fresh daily, a feature her customers value.

Johnson has just relocated to a larger space at 224 S. Washington St., just a few doors down from her original spot next to the cheese shop. After she gets settled, she hopes to have Friday night chocolate tastings.

The current recession is nothing new to Spokandy. Founded in 1913, the Spokane chocolatier has weathered wars, winter storms and the Great Depression.

"We've taken measures to protect ourselves," said owner Todd Davis.

With four retail locations, a wholesale business and corporate clients, when sales are down in one division, sales pick up in another. Spokandy's sales have remained strong over the years by responding to market trends, such as introducing sugar-free products about seven years ago when the Atkins diet revolution hit.

Retail and wholesale sales of sugar-free products now account for roughly 30 percent of Spokandy's business.

Spokane's Chocolate Myracles is another company that is thriving despite the economic downturn. Chocolate Myracles is celebrating three years in business by introducing a new chocolate bar.

Owner Julia Balassa-Myracle grew up in southern Mexico and recalls grinding cocoa beans with a hand mill and making chocolate as a little girl.

"Chocolate is a big part of my culture," she said.

Montezuma and his harem

The ancient Central American civilizations of the Olmecs and Aztecs are credited with cultivating beans from the cacao tree, or *Theobroma cacao*, meaning "drink of the gods." Prepared by grinding the cacao beans, adding water and hot chilies, the resulting liquid was poured back and forth or whipped with a wooden paddle to produce a frothy, brown beverage.

"To the Aztecs, chocolate was a source of spiritual wisdom, tremendous energy and enhanced sexual powers. The drink was highly prized as a nuptial aid, and was predictably the favorite beverage at wedding ceremonies," writes Christine McFadden in "Chocolate." Chocolate was given to Aztec warriors to sustain them in battle, and also played an important role in religious rituals.

Montezuma, Emperor of Mexico in the late 1400s, reportedly was a great believer in the power of chocolate. It seems he consumed copious amounts of the beverage, served in golden goblets by beautiful women, before retiring to his harem.

The Aztecs used cacao beans as a form of currency. Folklore has it that when Christopher Columbus arrived in the New World, he was greeted with a bag of cacao beans by Aztecs hoping to trade them for some of his goods. When Columbus looked puzzled, the Aztecs prepared a drink from some cacao beans and offered it to Columbus and his crew. They promptly spit it out, not impressed by the bitter, cold concoction. Nevertheless, Columbus took some cacao beans back to Spain and chocolate was introduced to Europe.

The Spanish added sugar and heated the chocolate drink, and its popularity in Europe surged. It became a drink of the rich and noble, and chocolate drinking houses sprouted up in the 1700s, akin to the coffeehouses of today.

After years of experimentation, chocolate manufacturers in Europe figured out how to separate the cacao butter from the bean. By melting the butter, adding back some ground cacao beans and sugar, the solid form of eating chocolate was born. Over centuries, chocolate's popularity has continued to grow.

It feels good

What is it about eating chocolate that makes us feel so good? For centuries, chocolate has been touted for its health benefits. It has been credited for improving digestion, strengthening the heart, curing fevers, improving complexions, and generally creating agreeable temperaments.

Is there any scientific basis for the use of chocolate in treating our ills? The chemical properties of chocolate would suggest so.

Chocolate contains endorphins, which give us that boost in energy, similar to a runner's high (without all of the hard work). The same endorphins are elevated when we fall in love, which is perhaps why we feel so good when we eat chocolate.

Caffeine and the alkaloid theobromine are also present in chocolate, both of which stimulate the central nervous system and give us that "pick me up" feeling.