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Experience the World of Chocolate

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Back in the day, men and women of culture hosted salons where fashionable literary figures, artists, statesmen, philosophers and other notables gathered. Taste TV (tastetv.com) took that idea and developed the Luxury Chocolate Salon as part of their "national Chocolate Stimulus Plan", a collection of local notable chocolatiers who gather together to show off what they do and exchange ideas with the public and other chocolatiers. Since Taste TV has chocolate salons in various areas of the U.S., you might want to check out when they'll be having their next salon near you. Upcoming salons in 2010 include San Francisco, Las Vegas, Seattle and Chicago.

On Sunday, October 11, 2009 Los Angeles hosted the Luxury Chocolate Salon at the Pasadena Convention Center featuring over 35 chocolatiers, confectioners and other chocolate products, as well chef and author talks and interviews throughout the day.

According to Taste TV, there was a 38% increase in attendance to this year's third annual salon and it was evident. Even late in the day, the crush of people waiting to sample chocolates and speak with chocolatiers was at least three or four deep. Included among the exhibits were beauty products, liqueur, and chocolate sculptures. While I wasn't able to visit every chocolatier's booth, I gave it the

good old college try.

The smell as I walked through the doors was like a warm sweet blanket--intoxicating. I imagine it must have been a bit like walking into Willy Wonka's chocolate factory. And I have to say I couldn't find a bad piece of chocolate anywhere. Below is a list of the booths I visited with some of the notes I took on each.

AF Chocolatière (aahsomefudge.com) was one of three chocolatiers who won Best in Salon. They also had second place in the Best Milk Chocolate category and first place in the Most Luxurious Chocolate Experience category. AF began in 2004 when Christine Hanson decided to develop her Auntie Fruf's Aahsome Fudge™ (or AF-squared). Currently, Studio City-based AF offers 8 different types of fudge ranging including their original recipe with walnuts, fudge dipped in Grand Marnier and their Cookies 'n Milk Collection. I had a taste of the espresso fudge, which was rich and flavorful. Available through their website.

Alter Eco (altereco.com), placed first as the Best Organic or Fair Trade Product, and second in both Best Dark Chocolate and Best Milk Chocolate categories. Alter eco started offering fair trade and certified organic foods in 2004. Though made in Switzerland, their cocoa is obtained from fair trade cooperatives in Ghana and Bolivia and uses unrefined sugar from the Philippines. All nine chocolate bars, ranging from their Milk Cajou (with raisins and cashews) to their Dark Twist Chocolate (with bits of crystallized orange peel) are made from organic ingredients. I tried the Dark Chocolate Blackout (85% cocoa) and it was very satisfying. Available at Whole Foods and through the website.

Amano Artisan Chocolate (amanochocolate.com), one of three chocolatiers who received Best in Salon, won first place as the Top Artisan Chocolatier, as well as firsts in both Best Dark and Best Milk chocolate and Best Dark and Best Milk chocolate bars. Amano is also the only American company to win an award from the London Academy of Chocolate when the Madagascar bar received a Bronze in 2008. Clark, who was manning the table, told those of us there that 90% of tasting chocolate is through scent. He had us chunk our chocolate first and absorb the first notes, then let the chocolate sit on our tongue and suck on it to get the full flavor. I had the Ocumare, which was dark and woody. Available online and other retail locations.

Chocoveda (chocoveda.com) won first place in the New Product category as well as second place in Most Artistic Designs, Most Luxurious Chocolate Experience and Best Flavored Chocolate and honorable mentions in Most Delicious Ingredient Combinations and Best Gift Set. Chocoveda, founded by Julia Lungin, an Ayurvedic Practitioner, is vegan certified, being 72% dark chocolate with no milk or animal products. Each truffle is also infused with ashwaganda, an ayurvedic tonic, and the truffle gift set has a chocolate for each chakra. The flavors range from green tea to tangerine to chai. I tried the peppermint, made for the fifth (throat) chakra and it was very pepperminty and refreshing. Available online.

Christopher Michael Chocolates (chrischocolates.com) received first in Best Truffle and Most Artistic Designs, as well as second in Top Artisan Chocolatier and Best Flavored Chocolate. Like many of the chocolatiers at the salon, Christopher Michael stressed their use of organic and Fair Trade ingredients. While their truffles were very pretty, the bar that was being sampled was the new Sizzling Bacon Bar. Made with milk chocolate, bacon, sea salt and popping candy (to give it that sizzling effect), I was impressed enough to buy an entire bar. Chris Michael (who was manning the table) also discussed how

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he liked to change flavors with the seasons and his use of fresh ingredients (his description of creamy butter was delicious). Available online with a shop and atelier in Newport Beach, California.

Clarine's Florentines (clarinesflorentines.com) received second in New Product Award, Best Comfort Chocolate Product and an honorable mention in Best Toffee. Created by Clarine Hardesty, Florentines are a confection made of thinly sliced almonds mixed with butter, sugar, honey and cream and then topped with Guittard bittersweet chocolate. The Florentines were a nice light finish to a heavy chocolate day. Available online and at several retailers in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Helen Grace (helengrace.com) received a first in Best Traditional Chocolates, second in Best Presentation and Packaging and an honorable mention in the Best Truffle category. Founded in 1944, Helen Grace is based in Southern California. Their Pecan Giants are impressive chocolate turtles made with white chocolate instead of dark or milk chocolate. I had a taste of the Truffle Deluxe, a truffle made with soft caramel, milk chocolate and capped with white chocolate that melted in my mouth. Available online and several retail locations in Orange County, California.

Jade Chocolates (jadechocolates.com) received first in Best Packaging and Presentation and Best Flavored Chocolate Bar and second in Most Delicious Ingredient Combinations, Best Flavored Chocolate and Best in Salon. I tried the green tea bar and loved it. But Jade also has chocolate candies packaged in Chinese Food takeout containers. I picked up the cocoa covered dry roasted edamame for the office and the light, nutty flavor was a hit. Available online and at retailers throughout the U.S.

Marti Chocolatt (martichocolatt.com), a Los Angeles-based chocolatier, received first in Best in Salon and New Product Award, as well as second in Most Gifted Chocolatier/ Chocolate Maker and Best Truffle. Marti Chocolatt is all about the fusing of different flavors with chocolate. Their flavors range from chipotle and Asian five spice to rose raspberry (a hit at the salon), ginger, fig, and even chevre (goat cheese). I tried the chipotle, and liked it a lot, but preferred the chevre. It had a nice, rich flavor. Available through the website.

Mignon (mignonchocolate.com), a California native chocolate founded in 1935, won first in Best Traditional Chocolate, second in Best Comfort Chocolate, Best Flavored Chocolate and Most Luxurious Chocolate Experience, and honorable mentions in Top Artisan, Most Delicious Ingredient Combinations and Most Artistic Designs. The flavors they sampled at the salon included lavender, pomegranate, ginger with lime sea salt, chili pepper, and mojito (lime with sugar). Also available are chocolates with no sugar added. I tried the raspberry and the pomegranate; both melted in my mouth. Available online, Southern California locations and Tehran.

Original Beans (originalbeans.com) won first place in Best Presentation and Packaging, as well as second place in Best Flavored Chocolate Bar and Best Organic or Fair Trade Products. One of the selling points is that for every chocolate bar purchase, they will plant a native tree in the area of origin for that cocoa. Their three bars come from the Congo (Cru Virunga), Bolivia (Beni Wild Harvest) and Esmeralda's Milk (Ecuador). So, if you were to purchase the Cru Virunga (my favorite at 70% cocoa and 20 hour conch or preparation), Original Beans would plant a native tree in the Congo. Only available online through chocosphere.com and drexeliuschocolates.com.

Sweet Beauty (sweetbeautyspa.com) won first in Best Comfort Chocolate Product, second in New Product Award and honorable mention in Best Gift Set. Founder and owner, Lisa Francoise, has both a skincare and food background. One of her philosophies is if you wouldn't eat it, it shouldn't be on your skin. Since almost nothing makes you feel better than chocolate, then why not chocolate beauty products. The ingredients are organic "from bean to bar." I tried a couple of the scrubs and was impressed with the smell and the feel after. I was advised to start with Nourish, Triple Chocolate Sugar Scrub, the Pot de Crème Body Cream and the lip balm. I walked away with the Taste Lip Balm, which has a lovely chocolate taste and just enough color. Available online and at Whole Foods.

Tcho Chocolate (tcho.com) received second in Best Traditional Chocolate, Best Dark Chocolate Bar, Best in Salon, Most Gifted Chocolatier/ Chocolate Maker and New Product Award. The last issue of Chocolate Zoom covered Tcho's goal to combine chocolate with technology and getting people to taste the actual fruity, citrus or nutty flavors inherent in chocolate without additives. Something I learned this time round, however, from Timothy Childs (Co-founder and Chief Chocolate Officer) is that 90% of those who grow cocoa pods have never tasted the end product. Because of this, they have no idea what effect their crops may have on that product, for good or ill. To that end, Tcho has set up flavor labs at some of the farms they buy cocoa from, so the farmers can experience how chocolate is made and what it tastes like, based on what they have grown on their own farms. I liked the nutty Tcho chocolate the best. Available online and at retailers around the U.S.

The Tea Room (thetearoom.biz) won a first for Best Flavored Chocolate Bar, second in Best Milk Chocolate and Best Flavored Chocolate, and honorable mentions in Best Dark Chocolate Bar and Most Delicious Ingredient Combinations. Based out of Culver City, California, The Tea Room infuses organic chocolate with organic tea for their chocolate bars. They also have seasonal chocolate truffles. Their bars range in cacao percentage from 30% to 72%, and their flavors include chamomile, jasmine, mint, chai. I tried the Green Earl Grey and loved it. Available online and at retailers throughout the U.S.

Vermeer Dutch Chocolate Cream (vermeercream.com), though not officially part of the chocolate exhibits, was found in the V.I.C. (Very Important Chocolate lover) Lounge. Imported from Holland using real Dutch chocolate and cream, this smooth liqueur was a nice break during a hectic day of chocolate tasting and interviewing. The selling point at this booth? Pre-poured shot glasses of Vermeer liqueur and free sample bottles. Available at retailers in California and Illinois, as well as other places cross the U.S.

While this article covered some of the chocolate sampled at the chocolate salon, it in no way covered the talks and lectures, the books signings, wine tastings, or the chocolate sculpture contest. At the end, there was even an auction of the chocolate sculptures still left in the building (a set of bookshelves, a tiki pole, and a pile of vintage couture shoes. It was a full day. If the Chocolate Salon comes anywhere near where you are, I recommend attending. First, eat a healthy meal. Second, get there early, and plan to stay all day. Third, drink water. It's a marathon, not a sprint, but it's definitely worth it.

Category: [A Matter of Chocolate](#)

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About editor:



Rachel is a freelance writer, copy editor, and proofreader who attempts to cobble enough together each month to pay for rent, kitty litter, and chocolate (and maybe cat nip for the cat). Sometimes you can find her in Larchmont Village struggling to pass by the Leonida's Chocolates without going in.

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