



Rethinking chocolate

Miss Chocolat's goodies, clockwise from one o'clock: Cameo with Riopelle cheese; with basil, sundried tomatoes and pine nut; Aztec with pepper, ginger and cardamom; black Quebec beer; chocolate nougat with pistachio, almond and orange peel; jasmine tea; and raspberry-chocolate jelly. In the centre: praline, ginger, maple sugar, and cookie crumble, wrapped in sushi nori.

The Outaouais is a burgeoning chocolate haven with chocolatiers bending the boundaries of chocolate flavour pairings — just in time for Easter

When he was a little boy, Roch Fournier never just ate his chocolate Easter bunnies. Instead, he melted them down and used the chocolate in recipes.

"I was the kind of kid who would take apart his remote-control cars to understand how they worked," says Fournier. "I ended up doing the same kind of thing with food."

Today, Fournier, who runs a Gatineau-based company called Rochef, is one of a new breed of chocolatiers who are putting the Outaouais on the map as a chocolate capital.

From Chocomotive, a brand new chocolate museum and emporium in Montebello, to Olivia Chocolatiers, Eastern Canada's only beans-to-bars artisanal chocolate manufacturer, to edgy chocolatiers in Gatineau proper, who are experimenting with unusual flavour combinations, there's an explosion of chocolate entrepreneurs all over the region.

Which means there's some tasty exploration to be done.

Fournier's specialty is matching chocolate to wine, beer and cheese. Yes, cheese. He makes 100-gram chocolate bars from different origins and of different intensities. On the back of each bar is a chart showing suggested food pairings.

For example, he suggests his 65-per-cent cocoa Trinidad chocolate be paired with — among other things — ice cider, smoked malt beer and a range of cheeses that includes the locally produced St. Albert Extra Old. His 66-per-cent Mexican chocolate goes with ruby port, red berry beers or Danish blue cheese.

Wait a minute — chocolate and cheese?

"Why not?" asks Fournier. Cheesecake is a popular dessert. The chocolate and cheese pairing is just a variation on that theme. "We're taking chocolate to the next level," he says.

By Daniel Drolet

Photographs by Brigitte Bouvier



Looking for something a little different? Try this bon-bon made of chocolate spiced with coriander, candied ginger and maple sugar, crumbled cookie and then wrapped in a sheet of nori (Japanese seaweed), available at Miss Chocolat in downtown Gatineau.

Also pushing boundaries in the Outaouais is Nathalie Borne.

She is the creative force behind Miss Chocolat, a small shop on Promenade du Portage in downtown Gatineau.

"If we sell biscotti, it's chocolate biscotti. If we make ice cream, it's chocolate ice cream. If we do fudge, it's chocolate fudge," she says. Even the artwork on the walls is made from chocolate.

Borne says her clients — most of them government workers from nearby office buildings — are becoming increasingly sophisticated and chocolate-savvy.

"It's like with wine and cheese. We've developed our palates over the last few years. I sell more dark chocolate than milk chocolate or white chocolate. People are more open, more daring."

How daring? The hand-crafted chocolates in Borne's display case offer some very unexpected taste combinations.

In addition to the standards like caramel, orange or mint, there are chocolates made with basil and sundried tomatoes, chocolates made with Indian masala spice, chocolates made with Riopelle cheese, and chocolates made with jasmine. Perhaps the most unusual is the sushi-style chocolate, spiced with coriander, candied ginger and maple sugar, wrapped in a crispy sheet of nori (Japanese seaweed). >>



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Dave MacDonald, owner of Olivia Chocolatiers in Cantley, takes a different approach. He makes high-quality chocolate directly from cocoa beans, which he then sells to restaurants and chocolatiers.

"We're the only artisan chocolate-maker in Eastern Canada going from beans to bar," says MacDonald, an engineer who turned to chocolate after he lost his job with a pharmaceutical company a few years ago.

MacDonald sources chocolate beans from a single plantation in the Caribbean — he won't say where because he doesn't want competitors buying from the same place — and brings them up to Cantley, where he cleans, roasts, mills, grinds, tempers and moulds the chocolate. Single sourcing gives Olivia chocolates a unique flavour, he says.

Most of his production goes to restaurateurs, but he has a line of certified organic chocolate bars that are sold at retail outlets.

For him, as for all chocolatiers, it's all about passion. And rarely does passion taste so good.

Chocolate in the Outaouais

Miss Chocolat: 173 Promenade du Portage in downtown Gatineau. www.misschocolat.com

Rochef: Unit 2, 15 Valcourt St., Gatineau. Rochef products also sold in retail outlets on both sides of the Ottawa River. See rochef.ca for a list.

Olivia Chocolatiers: Chocolate bars available in retail outlets in Ottawa and Gatineau. For a list, visit www.oliviachocolatiers.com

Chocomotive: Located in the old train station in Montebello at 502 rue Notre-Dame (on Highway 148). In addition to making organic fair-trade chocolates, Chocomotive is part of Quebec's Economuseum network. See www.economusees.com/chocolaterie_chocomotive_en.cfm.

For more (though not all) chocolate outlets in the Outaouais, visit *Savourez l'Outaouais* at www.agro-outaouais.com/home/index_e.php and search the Bread, Pastry, Candy Chocolate category of the directory.



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Nathalie Borne, the creative force behind Miss Chocolat, says her customers are increasingly sophisticated in their tastes.

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