

Chocolate health benefits



By Janine Fourie

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“Chocolate comes from cocoa - which is a tree; that makes it a plant, so therefore chocolate counts as salad!” Most chocoholics would agree with this sentiment as well as be delighted with scientific findings which proclaim the benefits of indulging in chocolate!



This month, it's all about the sweet stuff, and – in complete contrast to the health-kick trends – there is a glimpse of decadence in eateries serving over-the-top milkshakes, for instance. This is good news for those who will never give up indulging their sweet tooth.

I have to, unapologetically, admit that all our desserts at Big Easy Durban fall into the indulgence category. There are – fortunately, or unfortunately – no sugar-free or healthy desserts. Just pure pleasure to be enjoyed at the end of your meal!

Chocolate can help you lose weight

It's always good news to read research data regarding the benefits of chocolate and its consumption – it helps with any feelings of guilt. For instance, US psychologist Merrill Elias discovered that people who eat chocolate at least once a week tend to perform better cognitively. This translates to improved concentration levels and performance of everyday tasks, “such as remembering phone numbers, shopping lists and being able to multitask,” says Elias.

Chocolate also contains plant-produced compounds (called methylxanthines) that enhance various bodily functions. These include improving circulation and releasing feel-good endorphins, reducing cholesterol, stress and the risk of stroke, protecting the skin against sun damage and (believe it or not) preventing diabetes and helping to lose weight!

With regards to aiding weight loss, research shows that allowing a small block of good chocolate to melt on the tongue about 20 minutes before a meal will trigger the “I’m full” hormone. This should result in reducing the amount of food then consumed. The same theory applies after the meal and should cut down on subsequent snacking. The chocolate needs to be dark, though, with a good percentage of around 70 percent or more.

It has also been shown that the cocoa in dark chocolate improves insulin sensitivity and may delay or prevent the onset of diabetes.

The proviso of all this is that the chocolate has to be high-percentage dark chocolate and obviously, the amount consumed must be in moderation – no eating a whole slab all at once!

The history of chocolate

The origin of the chocolate beverage reaches back to 1900 BC (during the Aztec civilization in central America) and was believed to have aphrodisiac and fortifying qualities. It arrived in Europe in the sixteenth century and initially was popular among the ruling classes.

Chocolate in its solid form was first manufactured in the eighteenth century and has since been produced in every shape, taste-innovation and format that we know today – white, dark, unsweetened, containing nuts, mint, liqueurs and everything in-between.

Back to the beyond-decadent desserts – I have included a recipe for a chocolate caramel tart with Coco Pops, marshmallow and pistachio praline topping for you to try out at home. This recipe is from Thabiso Luthuli, the pastry chef de partie at Big Easy Durban. Enjoy!

Recipe:

Chocolate caramel tart with Coco Pops, marshmallow and pistachio praline

25g cocoa
225g plain flour
125g unsalted butter
80g icing sugar
3 egg yolks
1 tablespoons iced water

Caramel

250ml cream
50g unsalted butter
330g white sugar
125ml water
1 teaspoon maldon salt

Dark chocolate ganache

150g dark chocolate
125ml cream

Method

To make the salted caramel, place the cream and butter in a small saucepan over medium heat and bring to the boil. Remove from the heat and set aside.

Place the sugar and water in a medium saucepan over low heat and cook, stirring, until the sugar is dissolved. Bring to the boil and cook for 10–12 minutes, without stirring, or until the temperature reaches 150°C and the mixture is a deep caramel colour. Remove from the heat and working quickly, add the salt and cream and butter mixture and whisk to combine. Return to the heat and cook for a further 2 minutes or until thickened slightly.

Place the cocoa, flour, butter and icing sugar in a food processor and process until the mixture resembles fine breadcrumbs. With the motor running, add the egg yolk. Add the iced water and process until the dough just comes together. Turn out onto a lightly floured surface and gently bring together to form a ball. Flatten into a disc, wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate for 1 hour.

Preheat oven to 180°C. Roll the pastry out between 2 sheets of non-stick baking paper to 3mm-thick. Line a lightly greased 24cm round loose-bottomed tart tin with the pastry. Trim the edges and prick the base with a fork. Refrigerate for 30 minutes.

Line the pastry case with non-stick baking paper, fill with baking weights and bake for 15 minutes. Remove the paper and

weights and bake for a further 10 minutes or until the pastry is just cooked. Allow to cool in the tin. Spoon the salted caramel into the tart shell and refrigerate for a 2–3 hours or until set.

To make the dark chocolate ganache, place the chocolate and cream in a small saucepan over low heat and cook, stirring, until melted and smooth. Allow to stand for 10 minutes or until thickened slightly. Pour the chocolate mixture over the caramel and refrigerate for 1–2 hours or until set. Bring to room temperature and garnish with coco pops and praline
Serves 6–8.

ABOUT JANINE FOURIE

Chef Janine Fourie is the head chef at Big Easy Winebar & Grill in Durban.

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