

In Chloé Doutre-Roussel's mouth the word chocolate takes on a deeper and darker meaning. Not just in the way she makes it sound (rolling the consonants round her tongue in the manner of Juliette Binoche in the film *Chocolat*), but in her definition of what is – and what is not – fit to bear the name.

'This is chocolate,' she says, holding up a big brownish-black bar. 'A truffle is not a chocolate. I never eat truffles. When you say chocolate in the UK, most people will say "truffles" and I say "NO, NO!" Every time I say "chocolate" I am talking about this. Nothing else. The rest is confectionery.'

Indeed, since the ridiculously slender (for someone who eats at least a pound of chocolate a day) 39-year-old arrived in Britain two and a half years ago, to become chocolate taster at Fortnum & Mason – 'the best job in the world' – she has been on what she calls a 'mission' to educate the nation about the joys of real chocolate. That is 'chocolate, not chocolates' (and definitely not Mars, Snickers or Cadbury's Dairy Milk).

To that end she has written a book, *The Chocolate Connoisseur*, in which she offers those philistines among us who would confess to loving Milky Bars or Milky Ways (I do) the wherewithal to discover the 'sensual and intellectual' rewards of the real thing. Rather than thinking of chocolate as a sweet (she even sneers at Green & Black's or Marks & Spencer's Belgian Dark) we should regard it as we would fine wines or specialist cheeses.

'The world is full of people who need to know what I call the chocolate life. They need to explore for themselves...' she says, with such earnest conviction that it is tempting to renounce even my favourite Mint Aero.

Chloé's own 'chocolate life' started in a childhood dominated by travel and sweets. The daughter of a French diplomat father and a German mother who loved cakes and puddings, she developed a passion for chocolate that was not properly fulfilled until she was sent to France to study at the age of 14. After gaining a degree in tropical agronomy in Paris and a masters in agricultural economics at Reading University she began working for the United Nations and L'Oréal. The idea of turning her love of chocolate into a career did not occur to her until friends told her that Fortnum & Mason were searching for a new taster and buyer.

Such is Chloé's passion for her specialist subject (she talks about chocolate as if it were a living thing; 'there are no two identical chocolates; each one has its own personality') that you wonder if she has room in her life for anything else. 'If somebody finds my relationship with

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Life's a bowl of chocolate...

Forget that box of ersatz sweeties. As connoisseur Chloé Doutre-Roussel explains, there's a world of difference between the confectionery we eat and the 'sensual and intellectual' appeal of the real thing
 Interview Jane Gordon Photographs Teena Taylor

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« chocolate a bit weird they don't stay with me,' she concedes. 'But it's not as if I introduce chocolate in sexual games with boyfriends. I don't have fantasies like that.'

Is she, then, single? 'I am single but it doesn't mean I am alone. I am not in love with one single person,' she says. Then, bringing the conversation, as ever, back to chocolate, she adds: 'Chocolate is my very good friend but I can control it. The only thing love and chocolate have in common is desire.'

The other big question you want to ask Chloé is how come her desire for her very good friend chocolate hasn't turned her from the svelte size six she is into a big blancmange?

'If you eat chocolate far away from a meal, and eat chocolate rather than chocolates, you won't put on weight. If you listen to your body you will stop when your body tells you it's had enough. If you eat chocolate that way, then chocolate is a friend and a source of pleasure,' she says, running her fingertips over the big slab of the stuff that sits on the table between us.

Chloé has her first bite of chocolate every morning when her taste buds are 'inquisitive, intelligent and pure', and she can properly analyse what she is eating (she has a database

of the thousands of types she has eaten over the years). Since she was 14, the longest she has ever gone without chocolate has been two days and when she travels, she always packs at least two kilos of her favourite varieties. 'My absolute favourite is DeVries chocolate, which is made in Denver, but it's not on the market in the UK.'

Is the shine of her beautiful long hair and the sparkle in her eyes all down to the positive healthy effects of 'real' chocolate?

'Oh, what is it with you British and your constant focus on health benefits?' she objects. 'Chocolate is not a medication; chocolate is a pleasure. If you need to lower your cholesterol or improve the chlorine in your teeth, then take a pill. If it turns out it is good for health in addition to being a pleasure, great, but above all eating chocolate is a pleasure. And why do you British need an excuse for pleasure? Why cannot you afford to have pleasure just for pleasure? When I think, "Mmm, I feel like a chocolate", at no point do I need to know, "How many calories am I going to eat?" or, "Will this improve the quality of my hair?" No, I couldn't care less about that. All I care about is the pleasure,' she says, as she closes her eyes and brings a small chunk of chocolate to her lips... 'Mmmm, delicious. ■'

A day in the life of a chocolate connoisseur

5am Wake up, brush my teeth and prepare the tasting tray.

6am My first chocolate tasting of the day! A box of samples is waiting in the kitchen. This is the best time of day, when my palate is completely clean and receptive.

6.45am Head for the local swimming pool, where I swim for an hour. Exercise is essential as the chocolate I eat provides an entire day's worth of calories!

9am Arrive at Fortnum & Mason and go straight to the shop floor to pick myself an assortment of chocolate. My morning 'kit' weighs 350g – and will usually be finished by 2pm. I spit out everything I taste.

9.15am Have breakfast at my desk. If I start eating chocolate now, it will become an exclusively chocolate affair as I never mix chocolate with other food – and I try not to do this more than twice a week. My regular breakfast is either fruit or yoghurt.

10am Am called to the shop floor. Some Dutch tourists are looking for a bar I have never heard of, so I show them products I think they will find similar. They buy a set of four different bars.

10.30am Look at the chocolates in the fridges, spotting bloomed or damaged ones, which I then have removed.

2pm After lunch, usually a salad and a sandwich, I will not eat chocolate for at least two hours. If I do feel the urge, I have a bite of Michael Recchiuti's 85 per cent. Even 75 per cent cocoa chocolate seems too sugary eaten close to a meal.

3.30pm Receive a call inviting me to attend an annual chocolate show in Turin, Italy.

5pm Feel like having a chocolate that's not in my box, so I pop down to the storeroom. A good opportunity to check all the sell-by dates and stock levels.

6pm My assistant and I make a comparative tasting of raw materials such as candied ginger or orange for the Fortnum & Mason-branded chocolate range.

6.30pm Yoga class, then return home to eat dinner, relax and catch up with e-mails from friends in the worlds of chocolate, perfume, tea and coffee, eager to get updated on the fight for quality elsewhere in the world.

Taken from *The Chocolate Connoisseur* by Chloé Doutre-Roussel, published on Thursday by Platkus, price £12.99. To order a copy for the special price of £8.99, plus 99p p&p, call the YOU Bookshop on 0870 162 5006, or visit www.you-bookshop.co.uk

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