

# Thirty steps to chocolate heaven

Chloé Doutre-Roussel, a world-leading taster, reveals the secrets of a connoisseur. But first she tells Patrick Barkham how chocolate became her passion.

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It's all elbows on the Paris Metro in rush hour and then Chloé Doutre-Roussel whips out a small pink tin. "Time for a chocolate," she says, offering up an alluring heap of dark jewels. Obsessive author and roving chocolate consultant Doutre-Roussel is never caught short. Every month or so, she trundles her suitcase to a local chocolatier and purchases 12kgs of high-grade chocolate, for her own personal use.

There was a touch of Charlie Bucket plucking a golden ticket from a Wonka bar about Doutre-Roussel beating 3,000 people to the ultimate fantasy job in 2003: chocolate buyer at Fortnum & Mason in Piccadilly. For a woman who had had an "almost religious" passion for chocolate ever since she was a child, it must have felt like fate.

Her father was a diplomat and Doutre-Roussel, who is now 40, spent her early years in Mexico, Bolivia and Chile under Pinochet. Her home was packed with political refugees. "My childhood was very intense, very real life," she says. "In our house the children had much less importance than the people we were trying to help. It was a childhood without much mother love."

She looked for comfort in chocolate, but in South America she could get only Nutella and meagre rations of Lindt when family or friends visited Europe. Once, she remembers watching her mother at Mexican customs smearing Nutella all over her face. Bringing in food was banned so she pretended it was face cream. "Chocolate was precious. It was venerated at home. It was the most difficult thing to find and we were all very fond of sweets."

Overwhelmed by the variety of chocolate available when she moved to Europe at 13, she began cataloguing every brand she bought with her pocket money "so I would get the best ratio of pleasure to money". She ate them alone, when she first woke up, often at 5am. "Because I tasted them on a virgin palate in the morning, totally aware of the pleasure it was giving me, it was an intense relationship with chocolate. It was intimate."

At school she would blind-taste chocolate as a game with friends; she always guessed right. It was a skill that served her well several years later in Paris, when she had to blind-test 10 chocolates in an interview by Pierre Hermé, a chocolatier

and cake maker dubbed "the Picasso of pastry". He gave her a job - her first in the chocolate industry after stints in the UN and as an agronomist - on the spot. When she tasted chocolate made by chocolatiers such as Valrhona or Domori, it was "a slap", she says, "a point of no return". Now she'd rather go hungry than munch mass-market bars.

After three years at Fortnum & Mason, she returned to Paris last year, frustrated by Britain's baffling love affair with "chocolate creams", those luxury chocolates with soft sugary centres that are, as she puts it, an acquired taste "like Marmite". One of the few women at the top of the chocolatier profession, she will launch her own range of "Chloé chocolates" later this year.

Exactly 160 years after the invention of the chocolate bar, Doutre-Roussel believes we're experiencing a second chocolate revolution. While she is scathing about disingenuous "luxury" marketing and adventurous flavours (according to her there is no place for sea salt, cardamom or chillies with chocolate), she's hopeful that consumers are arming themselves with a new knowledge of cocoa beans and demanding better, boutique chocolate.

"If you look at what happened to cheese or coffee or olive oil, there was a revolution. People went from having no bottles of olive oil to having 10. At the end of this big chocolate revolution I'm sure the consumer will have more than just a bar of Lindt or Green & Blacks at home. This will be positive."

Doutre-Roussel sips water while I scoff lunch. Hers was chocolate. Every interview with her notes the apparent discord between Doutre-Roussel's 300g-a-day habit and her petite figure and immaculate skin. She swims for one hour every morning and eats lightly. "If I have a normal meal it will take three or four hours before I am hungry for a chocolate and that is a sacrifice I'm not prepared to make," she says.

However, she does not have a sweet tooth. Really. She'll ignore chocolate deserts - "a delusion version of chocolate", she says - and has no time for cake - "a day doesn't go by without my mother baking a cake". Unfortunately, she says, what most people take for chocolate is a confection of sugar, artificial vanilla flavourings and milk powder. There is chocolate and there are chocolates. "Chocolate is a chocolate bar and the rest is confectionery," she says. "It's the difference between an apple and an apple pie."

It may not surprise you to learn that she gives British chocolate short shrift. How can it be remotely sophisticated in a country where "national dishes are a mix of leftovers, like pies"? With equally delicious frankness, Doutre-Roussel challenges a few other comfortable assumptions about chocolate. As a Guardian reader you might comfort yourself with a nice slab of fair trade organic chocolate. Or perhaps you're a chocolate connoisseur who only buys 70% cocoa chocolate made in Belgium or Switzerland

Well. Doutre-Roussel takes a deep breath. Fair trade is not all it's cracked up to be, often making cocoa-growing villages dependent on one manufacturer when the fair trade market may prove as capricious as any other.

And some cocoa growers obtain organic status simply by purchasing a certificate that says "organic", and anyway, organic chocolate is "quite poor - badly farmed and badly dried".

Belgian chocolate is worse: "Almost impossible to find something acceptable to the palette." Swiss milk chocolate tastes nice not because of the chocolate but because their milk. And the 70% cocoa figure that is taken as a stamp of ultimate quality is arbitrary. Good chocolatiers should experiment with different proportions to bring out different flavours.

But if this makes you feel uneasy nibbling what was once a relatively guilt-free organic bar, don't. Doutre-Roussel would like us to cast off our irrational blending of chocolate with guilt. She would also like us to abandon our habit of teaming chocolate with alcohol and coffee ("the chocolate is not respected"), while chocolates and cigars are a no-no as well.

Doutre-Roussel does not enjoy smoky places, and shuns all members of the onion family because of the effect on her taste. The chlorine in her swimming pool is bad enough but sometimes she has to change lanes because swimmers near her are sweating out garlic smells.

Her passion for chocolate, which so often marketed as a food of love, is rather isolating. But she insists she shares an enjoyment of chocolate with friends who, mercifully, can see beyond her obsession. And while she'd like a partner who understands her relationship with chocolate she would rather have someone who can, at times, take her away from it. "I'm not alone and I'm not lonely," she says. "With chocolate you cannot be lonely."

There is a touch of missionary zeal about Doutre-Roussel's desire to improve the public's "intimacy" with chocolate but it is very sweet. "Chocolate is a pleasure we can all add to our life," she says just before she disappears into the crush of the Metro, tiny pink tin of chocolates clasped in her hand. "Chocolate is a little treasure we can all carry in this very hard and long journey that is life."

### **The thirty steps to connoisseurship**

The vast majority of people will only ever have one or two types of chocolate at home, and they will probably have been buying the same brands for years. I don't blame them: why deviate from a reliable, affordable, if often poor quality, source of pleasure?

But what many don't realise is that chocolate is like music - there is an enormous range of pleasures out there. And as with music, it is possible to explore, to "listen" to chocolate, to find out what suits you best, and to keep enough at home to suit any mood of the day. I appreciate that not everyone will want to do this, but I personally have 100 bars in my chocolate cellar. Often I may not enjoy them enough to finish them, but they're useful when it comes to comparing notes. I also keep a database on my computer, but the fact is that when I taste a bar I am concentrating so deeply that everything I need to know remains in my memory for years.

Becoming a connoisseur requires discipline, dedication, and an open and adventurous mind. It is totally unrelated to the number of chocolates you eat, or even the number of chocolates you taste "properly". Rather, it should be a joyful process in which you learn to listen to what your senses tell you.

### **Shopping for chocolate**

Connoisseurship begins with buying bars. Whether you do this from supermarkets, delicatessens, department stores or specialised websites, the tricks below will guide you. Chocolate is about pleasure, so do not hesitate to buy brands you already know and enjoy. Add a new brand or two each week and begin to explore the wild world of chocolate.

1 Go for plain, dark or milk. Chocolates with flavourings or fillings or decorations taste mainly like whatever flavouring or filling or decoration has been used and will teach you nothing.

2 Be ready to spend a little more than on your usual bar. As with wine, cheese or olive oil, fine products are more expensive. Expensive doesn't mean good, but good is seldom inexpensive.

3 A tasting will enlighten you only if you compare similar products. So, for instance, taste 2-4 bars of plain dark chocolate from Venezuela or, even more acutely, from one region of Venezuela, such as Sur del Lago. Compare dark and milk chocolate only if they're made by the same brand with the same beans (Mangaro milk and dark from Michel Cluizel, for instance). Or bars made through similar processes - those begun from the bean, from cocoa liquor, from melting bulk chocolate; [www.seventypercent.com](http://www.seventypercent.com) is a good place to go for more advice.

4 Ethical values. You are exploring the world of chocolate (taste, texture, style), not trying to save the world. Organic/fair trade chocolate is only a very small part of chocolates you can explore.

5 Healthy chocolate. All chocolate made from the basic ingredients - cocoa beans, sugar, cocoa butter, lecithin, and natural vanilla - is healthy if eaten in moderation.

6 Check sell-by dates and the temperature of the store. You can never be entirely sure, but you can reduce the risk of buying stale chocolate, or chocolate that has suffered from variations in temperature, by not buying in a shop kept at more than 23C.

### **Chocolate myths**

7 The higher the percentage, the better the chocolate. For the connoisseur, selecting chocolate by the percentage of cocoa in it is as irrelevant as selecting a wine by alcohol percentage. All it gives you is the level of sweetness. People talk a lot about single estate chocolate, but this is also misleading, just as the fact that a wine is from the Bordeaux region is no guarantee that it will be any good.

8 The higher the price the better the chocolate. Bright marketing will fool you and sell you poor quality chocolate wrapped in luxurious packaging at an impressive price. There is only one way to know what you've got: taste it.

9 The best chocolate is made from fine beans. Well, yes, this is true, but not all brands work from the bean. Around 99% of the chocolate bars around began as bulk chocolate that was then marketed as different brands. There is no shame in melting down bulk material as long as you choose fine ingredients and the packaging and/or blend is a special experience for the consumer, and of course the price reflects the actual quality.

10 That there is such a thing as the best chocolate in the world. We all have different taste buds, opinions, pasts and moods. When you analyse, you are not giving an opinion, you are analysing. Anybody can detect the difference between poor quality and a fine chocolate, but once within the acceptable quality range, we all have preferences.

11 Cru, grand cru, criollo, arriba. The use of any of these words in packaging should ring an internal alarm, whatever the brand, as there is no institution (yet) that sets nor monitors such standards.

### **Words you need to understand**

12 Beans. The seed of a fruit called the cocoa pod and the main ingredient in chocolate. The trees grow only in areas that are always warm and humid.

13 Liquor/cacao mass. Beans roasted, peeled and ground become a thick dark mass. The liquor is slightly acidic and astringent, and the aromas are still not at their full potential. They require further processing.

14 Couverture/bulk chocolate. Couverture" is the same as "bulk chocolate" but adjusted to a lower viscosity than that sold specifically for making bars.

15 Criollo. A variety of cacao tree that has almost disappeared. It is impossible at the moment to isolate enough to make a chocolate bar. Any mention of Criollo on packaging or promotional material should be translated into Trinitario. Even blue chip companies (ab)use these word.

16 Trinitario. A hybrid between the forastero and criollo, this has the production and disease resistance of the Forastero and much of the fine flavour of the Criollo, making it a commercial favourite. It grows in the Americas, Madagascar and Indonesia.

17 Forastero. These trees produce cacao beans with rustic and flat aromas. Africa provides more than 80% of the world's cacao beans and all of it is forastero.

18 White chocolate. It is not legally chocolate in the world of chocolate connoisseurs. It is confectionery.

19 Blue chip brands. These are the classics every connoisseur needs to know and must to be able to recognise "blind". They all work from the bean and employ staff who hunt for a regular, quality supply. In alphabetical order, the brands are: Amedei, Bonnat, Domori, Felchlin, Michel Cluizel, Pralus, Scharffen Berger, and Valrhona. There are many new brands working from the beans all over the world, mainly in the US and Italy, and all are worth trying at least once: De Vries, Coppeneur, Theo Chocolates, Amano are good examples. You will most likely have to purchase them online.

20 Tasting. Tasting is not eating. Tasting requires that you are in state where your mind and body are alert, sharp and ready to listen to the subtleties of the chocolate.

## **Tasting**

To taste you need to engage all five senses. It might seem obvious, but don't do it after smoking or eating a big meal, or when you're tired or stressed.

21 Use your eyes. Look at the piece of chocolate you are about to taste, evaluating its texture before you put it in your mouth. The surface should be smooth and shiny, indicating that the cocoa butter is properly crystallised (tempered). Do not be swayed by colour. The shade is influenced by many factors, such as bean type and roasting time as well as milk content.

22 Touch it. Is it sticky, grainy, sandy or velvety? Crisp or crunchy? A floury texture suggests cocoa powder has been added, a sign of poor quality chocolate. A clayey feel in the mouth tells you there are probably many particles of too small a size (the ideal is 16/18 microns) or that the proportion of cocoa butter added is high. The ideal texture is the one that melts smoothly.

23 Listen to it. Did it break easily? Neatly? Drily? A chocolate that snaps without too much effort is a sign that the balance between cocoa and butter is right. Dark chocolate snaps more easily than milk because, unlike milk chocolate, it contains no milk powder.

24 Smell it. Taste is 90% smell. It takes practice to describe a chocolate's "nose", but we do so by relating aromas to those in our past experience. The problem is that we are so bombarded by artificial smells that we have lost our database of natural scents. Sadly, when a lot of people smell a fine chocolate for the first time, they do not recognise it as chocolate, because for them, chocolate should smell of sugar and vanilla. Fine chocolate, just like wine, can be described by referring to natural products around us - fruit, flowers, woodlands or spice. A chocolate that smells smoky may have been carelessly dried. One that smells mouldy has been damaged in storage. You can build up your database of smells by using your nose whenever you can. Experience the scents of wet weather. If you're in the woods, smell the soil and the leaves. When you go to the market, take a sniff of each basket of mushrooms, herbs, fruit and flowers. Do all this and you will rediscover the potential of your sense of smell. We all have the ability, but many of us have forgotten it.

25 Taste it. When tasting a new chocolate, try just a small, fingernail-sized piece. Put it on your tongue and chew for a few seconds to break it into smaller chunks. Then stop and allow it to melt so that all flavours are released. Make sure the chocolate is spread all around your mouth - this way you'll taste the flavours most intensely.

## **Flavours**

When you start tasting truly good chocolate, you will find that its flavour can linger for many minutes. This is the best incentive I can think of to invest in an expensive bar. It may cost three times as much as your usual bar, but the pleasure you'll get from it is intense and long. Fine chocolate has harmonious tastes - you'll need to concentrate to sense their presence. Look out in particular for bitterness, acidity and astringency. The first two are welcome, but astringency is a bad sign, often found in poor quality chocolate, and indicates poor fermentation.

26 Sweetness. My simple rule is this: if you notice the sugar, there is too much of it in the bar. Excess sugar is used to disguise poor quality or uninteresting beans, covering up the burnt, metallic or mouldy flavours you might otherwise taste. Sugar is needed to reveal aromas, however; cocoa butter has the same effect. To make a fine chocolate, brands need to find the optimal level of sugar that reveals the aromatic palette of the beans used at their best.

27 Bitterness, sourness and acidity. When I introduce novices to real chocolate, many use the word "bitter" to describe it. It's the same word that often springs to

people's lips when tasting tea or coffee. It is their way of qualifying a new, more intense taste, but nine times out of 10, it is not the most accurate word. Poor quality chocolate may be astringent or acidic. True bitterness is felt in the middle at the back of the tongue. Test it in foods like chicory or grapefruit. Guanaja from Valrhona is rather bitter, but a mild and elegant way. With some training, you'll even detect chocolates that begin with one flavour (sweetness, for instance) and evolve to another (say, bitterness) with a hint of a third (salty) - like Lindt 99%.

28 Saltiness. Salt is not often added to chocolate but you can find it in some filled chocolates (it enhances the nuttiness in pralines) or in bars like Domori's Latte Sal or 99% Lindt. Here it would be used to reveal particular aromas from the beans or the nuts.

29 Describing aromas and flavours. The last part of tasting consists in finding the words to describe aromas and flavours you detect. This is hard as we are not used to associating a word with a taste sensation. I suggest you proceed as for a wine tasting: try to find associations with the world around you. The tasting wheel below will help. Try it - take a square of Valrhona's Manjari. Pop a small piece into your mouth and once the initial burst of acidity recedes, see if you can notice the clear red fruit notes. In the beginning, if you can at least identify "fruity", that is excellent. Later on, as your ability to identify flavours and aromas grows, you'll be able to fit more specific words to tastes. You can move from tasting Java from Pralus as "vegetable" to something more accurate, for instance, wood or a wet forest. Find words that sum up what you taste, not what you think you should taste. On a graph, you could draw up one curve for the "intensity" of the flavours, in their initial attack, in their development, and in their finish. You may taste "flowery" followed by "woody" and then "woody flirting with spicy".

30 Soon all these steps will become second nature. You won't have to think about it, you will just enjoy the delightful part of the journey - the excitement and desire, then the delightful, intense and sensual indulgence. And you can reproduce this experience as many times as you wish, for as many years as you wish.

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