

Chef Jeff falls in love with candy maker Ginger Elizabeth

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By Jeffrey Caves

Chocolate: miracle food or vice, heart-healthy and antioxidant rich or sugary and fat-laden?

Who cares? It tastes good.

And although justifying consumption of anything in that way could be considered dangerous, I believe chocolate is worth the risk.

Even the Olmecs, precursors to the Mayans and Aztecs for Central American dominance, were fans of this dark elixir (archeologists recently discovered the remains of ground cocoa beans among the ruins).

The insides of this strange, football-shaped object do not give off the appealing “eat me” look of, say, a papaya or a mango, but instead, though I hate to say it, look like a collection of misshapen walnuts trapped in thick white snot.

These misshapen walnuts are cocoa beans, albeit raw, lacking in that characteristic chocolate aroma and none too tasty.

They have to be roasted, ground and put through a dozen other processes to make them into a bitter, aromatic liquid—chocolate in its original form.

This beverage became the drink of kings, mixed with spices and chilies and reserved only for nobility.

But it was sugar cane that elevated this spicy, bitter concoction to the level of soul food.

That fateful day when sugar and cocoa bean first met altered the course of history and sent the world in a new direction. Okay, maybe not a whole new direction, but it was certainly a good day for pastry chefs.

In the centuries since, chocolate has reached its potential and is now a global food. Thus, excellent chocolate can be found even in humble Sacramento.

Ginger Elizabeth’s (1801 L St.) is the best chocolate company in Sacramento, and quite likely the best in Northern California.

Ginger Elizabeth, the owner, makes all her chocolates from scratch and monitors the growing, harvesting and processing of the chocolate.

At this juncture I must say her parents showed remarkable foresight in naming their daughter Ginger Elizabeth, an excellent name for an excellent shop.

Elizabeth prides herself on not using extracts to flavor her chocolates and the walls of her pint-size shop are lined with her creations.

The dark chocolate offerings include Maya chili, lavender caramel and Meyer lemon while the selection in milk chocolate runs more to strong flavors not overpowered by the milky richness of the chocolate.

The dark chocolate with Meyer lemon ganache was exceptional. It managed to taste not of lemon juice or lemon zest but the smell of lemon itself. (Chocolate tasting is akin to wine tasting in its use of bizarre and seemingly improbable descriptions of flavors.)

These strong flavors in her milk chocolate creations include passion fruit, with its distinctively tart-sweet flavor profile and crème fraîche.

The ice cream sandwiches that the shop offers, made from scratch behind the counter, are among the most interesting offerings. The ice cream is sandwiched between two large, flat macaroons, and each has the same flavor in three different forms.

The one I sampled was salted caramel, and, for those not familiar with this particularly delightful treat, I wouldn't try it in this manner, as this snack is only for the seasoned and dedicated caramel lover.

The sandwich was a full frontal assault in three different forms: the salted caramel macaroon, the salted caramel ice cream and a drizzle of salted caramel.

To be fair, the *fleur de sel* (a light but pungent French sea salt) in this caramel did provide a welcome aftertaste of salt just as my mouth grappled with an onslaught of sugar from all sides.

Reeling from this attack, I spied the creations lining the walls, from chocolate bars to delicate macaroons and creamy gelatos, all made just a few feet away.

Just across the counter was one of the finest chocolatiers in the nation, and as my knees buckled under a barrage of sugar and salt, I wondered how she had ended up in Sacramento.

The answer came to me immediately. Who cares? Her creations, just like the chocolate they are made from, just plain taste good.

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