How to Conduct a

CHOCOLATE

World champion pastry chef Chris Hanmer shares tips and information on how to run a chocolate tasting event, a genius idea that can be used in dozens of different ways. Think about it as a VIP opportunity for your chocoholic brides, an early lead-in to holiday orders, a way to co-market with gourmet wine or tableware stores, an off-season marketing event for new clientele . . . the possibilities are endless. And, of course, delicious!

SETTING UP THE TASTING:

1. Find a location free from background noise and smell, such as ringing phones, music, road traffic noise, etc. Being able to concentrate as intently as possible will facilitate flavor detection.

2. A tasting should have a sampling of no more than six different chocolates. Any more, and your palate’s ability to discern the subtle flavor variations will be weakened. If you want to sample more than six, take a break of at least 15 minutes to give sensitive taste buds time to recover.

3. Arrange the samples so that the tastings go from light to dark. Start with milk chocolate, or the chocolate with the lowest percentage of cacao, and end with the darkest one. This sets up your taste buds correctly to experience the more intense, more complex chocolate.

4. Make sure that the piece of chocolate is large enough to accommodate full evolution of the flavor profile. A piece too small may not allow you to detect every subtle nuance as the chocolate slowly melts. The important thing to remember is that flavor notes gradually evolve and unfold on the tongue rather than open up in one large package. So don’t think small here—10g should be a minimum starting point.

5. Allow the chocolate to rest at room temperature before tasting. Cold temperatures will hinder your ability to detect the flavors.

6. Make sure you’re working with quality chocolates. The surface should be free of blemishes such as white marks (called bloom). Observe the color and manufacturer’s job at molding and tempering. Does the chocolate appear to have been crafted carefully or slovenly? The bar should have a radiant sheen. Chocolate comes in a multifarious brown rainbow with various tints, such as pinks, purples, reds and oranges. What do you see? Break the piece in half. It should resonate with a crisp “SNAP!” and exhibit a fine gradient along the broken edge.

7. Clear your palate. This means that your mouth should not contain residual flavors from a previous meal. Eat a wedge of apple or piece of bread if necessary. This is crucial in order to taste the subtleties of chocolate’s complex flavor.

8. Observe the chocolate, as in step 6, above, with every sample. Smell the chocolate, especially at the break point. The aroma is an important component of flavor. Inhaling will prime the tongue for the incoming chocolate. It also gives you a chance to pick up the various nuances of the aroma. Take notes on the chocolate’s aroma (sweet, sour, floral) as part of your tasting experience.

9. Place the chocolate on the tongue, and allow it to arrive at body temperature. Let it melt. Chew it only to break it into small enough pieces that it begins to melt on its own—the goal is tasting, not eating! This step is crucial, for it allows the cocoa butter to distribute evenly in the mouth, which mutes any astrignencies or bitterness in the chocolate.

10. Observe the taste and texture. As the chocolate melts, concentrate on the flavors that are enveloping your tongue. Melting will release more volatile compounds for you to smell. Close your eyes, take notes on its texture (velvety, grainy, creamy, waxy), its flavor notes and the order of the flavors, since each chocolate will have its very own beginning, middle and finish.

Chef Chris notes: Texture can be the most obvious clue about the quality of a chocolate. Low-quality chocolates will have a grainy almost cement-like texture.

11. Now the chocolate is nearing its finish. How has the flavor evolved? Is the chocolate bitter? Heavy? Light? Was the texture smooth or grainy? Do any changes in texture and flavor occur? Enjoy this moment of bliss and bask in contentment. Take note of how the chocolate leaves the palate. Is there a strong reminder lingering in your mouth, or does it quickly vanish?

Chef Chris notes: Another indication of lower quality or stale chocolate will be metallic or other unpleasant notes, often most evident at the finish.

12. Cleanse your palate thoroughly with a bit of bread and repeat the process with a different chocolate. The comparison will highlight the subtle flavor notes in each chocolate.

Chef Chris notes: Professionals typically do not talk while tasting, though they may compare notes afterwards. That said, however, chocolate tastings should be fun! ACD
Here and on the following page are some ideas you can use to organize your tasting notes and "chart" the flavors of your samples. Set up a few chocolate flights over the next few weeks for yourself and friends and try one method each time, then use the one you feel most comfortable with, or create your own for when you want to launch chocolate tasting to your clientele.

A few more notes from Chef Chris: You're free to come up with your own interpretations in your own words. Have fun with language, and in decoding all the minute subtleties in a tiny piece of luscious, delectable chocolate! There are no rules and there is no set language to describe your feelings when tasting chocolate. But, to get things started, here are some thoughts on how to consider the flavors to help you describe them for your tasting records.

- What does the chocolate feel like on the tongue? Is it smooth, thin or creamy? Uniform, grainy or uneven?
- How complex are the flavors? Do they seem multi-dimensional, and multi-layered? Or are they simple?
- If it's intense, would you describe it as brave, strong, full-bodied?
- How long do the tastes last? Are they fleeting and quick? Slow and lasting?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appearance</th>
<th>Aroma</th>
<th>Texture</th>
<th>Taste</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chocolate Sample</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If you think you taste coconut, cinnamon, or chili, you're not mistaken. All these flavors and more, like pineapple, orchid, orange, cherry and cloves, are notes that belong to chocolate. You will also note textures and qualities like buttery, sour, and sugary. Use the wheel below to help guide your feelings and search for the flavor.

**FLAVORS TO LOOK FOR BY REGION**

**Brazil:**
Bright acidity. Well-balanced cocoa flavors. Often times with subtle fruity note.

**Colombia:**
Moderately fruity, lightly bitter with deep cocoa flavor.

**Costa Rica:**
Fruity with a balanced cocoa flavor.

**Dominican Republic (Santa Domingo):**
Deep earthy flavor with fragrant tobacco notes.

**Ecuador (Arriba):**
Fruit and well-balanced floral (jasmine flower) notes.

**Ghana:**
Deep, classic cocoa flavor. Lends balance to more complex beans.

**Indonesia (Java):**
Appealing acidity balanced with clean cocoa flavors.

**Côte d'Ivoire:**
Deep, classic cocoa flavor. Lends balance to more complex beans.

**Jamaica:**
Bright and fruity. Appealing aromas. Often reminiscent of pineapples.

**Mexico:**
Bright acidity.

**Madagascar:**
Light citrus flavors somewhat like tangerines, with bright acidity.

**Panama:**
Classic cocoa flavor highlighted by subtle fruit and roasted nut flavors.

**São Tomé and Príncipe:**
Classic cocoa flavor that's very well-balanced.

**Trinidad and Tobago:**
Complex fruitiness plus appealing spiciness such as cinnamon.

**Venezuela:**
Complex fruit flavors that evoke ripe red plums and dark cherries.

**Vegetable:**
Carrots, caramel, coffee, tea, tobacco, roasted almonds, peaches, melons.

**Spicy:**
Licorice, pepper, cinnamon, vanilla, clove, ginger.

**Flowery:**
Jasmine, rose, orange blossom, tropical fruits, preserves, raisins, banana, dried plums.

**Nutty:**
All nuts, caramel, coffee, tea, tobacco, roasted almonds, peanuts, cashews.

**Roasted:**
Caramel, coffee, tea, tobacco, roasted almonds, peanuts, cashews.

Chris Hamner has made a steady progression from peeling potatoes at a country club at the age of 15 to claiming the gold medal as the youngest-ever American chef for a World Pastry Team Championship. In 2006 he became the executive pastry chef for the Ritz-Carlton Lake Las Vegas property.

In 2010 Chef Hamner launched the School of Pastry Design, bringing his experience and dynamic techniques to a beautiful studio kitchen in Las Vegas, where students—professionals and non-professional alike—can spend time one-on-one or in small groups mastering the art of pastry design. Chef Hamner consults for sugar showpieces and other specialty pastry projects, as well as with restaurants and resorts on their pastry needs.

**Weblinks:** SchoolofPastryDesign.com