

CHEF'S CORNER



Tarragon Roasted Seasonal Vegetables

MMMMM Chocolate

by Amber Balshaw, Preferred Sonoma Caterers

Do you really need an excuse or a holiday to enjoy chocolate? As the days turn rainy and gloomy, chocolate is just the thing to raise the spirits -- scientists and Harry Potter say so. But if you are trying to be good and only have chocolate on special occasions, Valentine's Day is right around the corner.

In recent years, the classic chocolates of the past have been set aside in favor of more gourmet items. As you are shopping for your sweetheart, if you are buying dark chocolate you are likely to see numbers like 74%, 82% or even 54%. What do these mean? It is the percentage of Cacao Liquor. So, what is Cacao Liquor? It is the purest form of chocolate, the beans that have been roasted and then conched (ground between two usually stone wheels) until smooth and silky. From here, products like sugar and fats are added, so it will hold in bar form.

Having always been a dark chocolate fan, I personally like a mid-range chocolate of 65-74% cacao -- this is

rich but sweet dark chocolate. For those who want to go less sweet, try for a higher cacao percentage. Anything in the 80s is likely to be on the bittersweet side. Milk chocolate falls in the 35% range and also has milk solids added. Fat is added for texture and volume and to help it solidify. Those fats are often vegetable oils (in less expensive chocolates). For a silkier mouth feel, look for one that has cocoa butter added for the fat (by the way, cocoa butter is high in vitamin E). Cocoa butter has a very low melting point, so don't store finer chocolates at more than about 75 degrees. But there is nothing more luscious than a square of dark chocolate that just melts on your tongue like butter.

When cooking, you can use chopped block chocolate or chocolate chips. All of the recipes will work well with either. I have learned that, in a pinch, if you must melt chips, add 1 tablespoon of vegetable oil or cocoa butter for every cup -- this will counteract the wax coating added to help prevent melting in transport.

Thinking of Valentines Day, I have a couple of easy

recipes for you to share at home. We often do a Triple Chocolate Fondue for parties -- if one kind of chocolate is good, three is great! Here are recipes for all three:

Chocolate Fondue (milk or dark) (serves 2 to 4)

4 oz Semisweet Chocolate or Milk Chocolate (chocolate chips work fine)

4 oz Heavy Cream (yes, heavy cream, people)

Bring the cream to a boil, then remove it from the heat and stir in the chocolate till melted.

Chef Amber Balshaw is the owner of Preferred Sonoma Caterers, with over 20 years in her field. Executive Chef at her own PSC, a past Pastry Chef, and a valedictorian of the Culinary Institute of America. Amber is a true foodie, she loves food in all its forms and all aspects of culinary world. Please send your comments to Amber@SonomaCaterers.com and see more of her at Blog.SonomaCaterers.com.



White Chocolate Fondue (serves 2 to 4)

4 oz White Chocolate

3 oz Whole milk

Use the same directions as for milk and dark.

Note: When working with white and milk chocolate, the sugar content is much higher and the chocolate is more likely to burn or scorch, so take extra caution if reheating.

Serve warm with your favorite dippers, such as Strawberries or Bananas; any fruit is great with it. You can also dip marshmallows and put them on graham crackers for s'mores. Think of serving the chocolate in a martini glass for a romantic touch.

For something even richer try Chocolate Marquis, this is like a mousse but without the whipped cream. It does contain raw egg, so it should be handled carefully and kept refrigerated.

Chocolate Marquis (serves 6-8)

10 oz Chocolate Chips

4 oz Butter

4 Eggs (separate the yolks and whites)

2 T Sugar

Place the butter in a heavy bottomed sauce pot and melt slowly, making sure not to brown. Remove the butter from heat and stir in the chocolate chips; stir till melted, then return to a very low heat if necessary. Transfer the chocolate and butter mixture to a mixing bowl and cool to room temperature. Whip the egg whites until they form soft peaks, then slowly add sugar and whip till glossy. Fold egg yolks into the chocolate butter mixture, then fold in the whipped egg whites, and refrigerate until firm.

Scoop into a beautiful glass or even a chocolate cup and serve with fresh berries.

Enjoy!



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Read more from our Chef Amber Balshaw in her column here in the Petaluma Post and on her blog Everything Culinary at blog.SonomaCaterers.com

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