

Chocolate: Agriculture's Valentine's Gift

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Ah, chocolate, a favorite treat of millions of Americans. Decadent and rich in texture, chocolate is a versatile agricultural product that is enjoyed in numerous forms and for limitless celebrations. Did you know that in 2018 the National Retail Federation estimated that \$19.6 billion was spent on Valentine's Day celebrations? Or that chocolate represents 75 percent of the total Valentine's candy sales annually?

Chocolate is a product of the Cacao tree, primarily grown in the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. A time-consuming process of harvesting the cacao pods, fermenting, cleaning, roasting, grinding, blending, and tempering is required before raw cacao resembles a chocolate product we could purchase at a store. Chocolate can be traced back to ancient Mayans and Olmecs of southern Mexico dating to around 1500 B.C.

Despite the long history of chocolate, it has changed drastically over the centuries of consumption. The Mayans combined chocolate with chili peppers, honey, and water. Later the Spanish and other Europeans made their own varieties of hot chocolate with sugar, cinnamon, and other additives. According to the History Channel, chocolate first arrived in North America via a Spanish ship into what is now Florida in 1641.

Despite raw cacao being grown and initially processed in the Caribbean, Central America, and South America, chocolate is produced globally. The process of refining chocolate and transforming it into a desirable product can be accomplished anywhere in the world. Americans consume nearly 18 percent of the world's chocolate, which represents [over \\$18 billion annually](#). The average American consumes [9.5 pounds](#) of chocolate annually, which is conservative to the 20 pounds the average Swiss person consumes per year.

Although we may think of chocolate as a commercial product, it is actually an agricultural product that is formed with partnerships from thousands of American farmers. According to the World Cocoa Foundation, the majority of American chocolate manufacturers use domestically produced sugar, milk, peanuts, almonds, and sweeteners. It is estimated that U.S. chocolate manufacturers use 3 billion pounds of sugar, 653 million pounds of milk, 360 million pounds of peanuts, 43 million pounds of almonds, and 1.7 billion pounds of corn syrup sweeteners annually.

Modern chocolate production methods allow consumers the luxury of enjoying thousands of variations of chocolate delicacies. Of course, it is important to understand the finer nuances of chocolate taste testing. To some, chocolate is chocolate. However, upon careful sampling, it is possible to tell the difference between brands and production methods and savor the unique flavors of chocolate.

Key Steps for Chocolate Tasting:

1. Visual inspection: if the chocolate has a glossy surface and even color, it indicates a bar of well-tempered chocolate. Scuffs and inconsistent appearance aren't an indicator of poor quality, but it is less visually appealing.
2. Smell: Chocolates have their own unique smell. Some will have traces of nuts, cream, caramel, coffee, wine, or even fruit.
3. Sound: the texture of chocolate bars can be identified by snapping a piece of chocolate into two pieces.
4. Palatability: Perhaps one of the more crucial steps to sampling chocolate is to resist the urge to chew and devour chocolate when you consume it. To fully experience chocolate, it is recommended to put the chocolate between your tongue and the roof of your mouth and let the chocolate melt for a short period of time. Once the chocolate has melted, feel the texture of the chocolate. Textures vary from smooth to gritty or being dry.
5. Taste and Flavoring: Concentrate on the flavors you can taste while the chocolate is melting in your mouth. Does the flavor of the chocolate change or stay the same? Does the flavor last? Try to describe the flavor to someone else using descriptive characteristics, like sweet, fruity, or smooth.

Try these five steps to further enjoy your chocolates this Valentine's Day. It can be an enjoyable experience to ask others to taste chocolates and see how each person tastes different flavors in the same brand of chocolate.

While cacao beans are grown in warmer climates, it is possible to craft your own chocolate-based endeavors in Ohio. Thinking outside the (chocolate) box may provide an opportunity to develop a unique small business. Do you have a niche chocolate product? Contact the Highland County Extension Office for more information about the Agricultural Marketing Team, who may be able to assist you in marketing your food products.

Upcoming Events:

Highland County Fertilizer and Pesticide Recertifications:

- **February 19, 2019**, Ponderosa Banquet Center, 5:00 pm to 6:00 pm Fertilizer Recertification – Private and Commercial, and 6:30 pm Pesticide Recertification (Core, 1, 2,3, 4, 5, 6) Private Applicators Only
- **March 4, 2018**, Ponderosa Banquet Center, 10:00 am to 11:00 am Fertilizer Recertification – Private and Commercial, and 11:30 am Pesticide Recertification (Core, 1, 2,3, 4, 5, 6) Private Applicators Only.

Registration details will come in the mail from the Ohio Department of Agriculture. Registration for OSU Extension Pesticide and Fertilizer and your renewal application for ODA Pesticide/Fertilizer must *both* be completed. Meals will be included at each recertification training at Ponderosa.

The topic of the **Highland County Monthly Extension Programming** for February will be **Maple Syrup Production**. The program will be held on February 27, 2019, at 10 AM. The

program will be held at Ponderosa Steakhouse in Hillsboro and is free to attend. Attendees are encouraged to purchase lunch on their own at Ponderosa. Please RSVP to reserve your seat by calling 937-393-1918. Attendees will learn about the process of producing maple syrup and marketing.

The Highland County Extension Office will be hosting a **tour of the OSU Meat Lab** in Columbus, Ohio, for those who are interested in beef and meat production on March 19, 2019. The tour will coincide with the meat class on campus, so attendees will be able to see the lab on a harvesting day. The tour will be held in the morning and space is limited. Please call the Highland County Extension Office at 937-393-1918 for additional information and to reserve your place for the tour.

The topic of the **Highland County Monthly Extension Programming** for March will be **Storytelling for Video Production**. The program will be held on March 27, 2019, at 10 AM. Attendees will learn about the different kinds of documentary films and how storytelling impacts the audience's perception of videos. The program will be held at Ponderosa Steakhouse in Hillsboro and is free to attend. Attendees are encouraged to purchase lunch on their own at Ponderosa. Please RSVP to reserve your seat by calling 937-393-1918.