



Sweet sensations

The thrill of chocolate touching the lips is said to rival that of a passionate kiss



Mmmm, chocolate: sensuous, decadent, delicious. There's lots to love about chocolate, and it's not only to do with taste.

A gift of chocolate signifies love. Sharing chocolate is romantic. These days, we don't even have to feel guilty about it. Scientists claim that the consumption of good quality chocolate has a range of benefits for our physical and emotional health.

Chocolate has a very long history, beginning with its discovery by ancient Mesoamerican civilisations more than 3,000 years ago. History shows that cacao beans, from which chocolate is derived, have even been used as a currency in exchange for goods.

Since the earliest times, chocolate has been seen as an important luxury. The Aztecs used cacao beans to prepare a hot, frothy beverage which had stimulant and restorative properties, but they saved the chocolate itself for warriors, emperors and priests. By the 17th century, chocolate had become a prized item among the European nobility.

Other tales pervade. Evidence suggests the early use of cacao was as an alcoholic beverage. Taken as a fermented drink, chocolate was used in religious ceremonies. The drink also became associated with the goddess of fertility.

Roughly two-thirds of the world's cocoa is produced in West Africa, primarily in the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Cameroon and Nigeria. Production of the delightful confection that ends up on our shop shelves is tedious and time-consuming. Initially, skilled workers cut ripe bean pods from the cacao tree, split them and scrape out the pulp. They are then left to dry in the sun, and bagged for shipment to market for further processing.

The dried beans are roasted, then ground, releasing a thick substance called "chocolate liquor". It tastes bitter at first, the sweetness added later.

Researchers keep finding evidence that a little chocolate every day can provide health benefits – among them, it has the potential to boost brain function, and it also has anti-ageing properties. Chocolate is full of antioxidants, and even tannins which prevent tooth decay.

A small daily dose of quality dark chocolate can improve blood flow, lower cholesterol, and help muscles recover from exercise, scientists say.



Appearance, smell, taste and texture all contribute in making the best chocolate. 最優質的朱古力，色、香、味、質感俱全。



情迷朱古力

提到朱古力，不其然令人想起迷醉、味美而又帶點沉溺的享受，然而，舌頭所嚐到的，只不過是朱古力其中一個吸引人之處而已。

以朱古力作為禮物，情意綿綿，能與愛侶共享朱古力帶來的甜蜜，浪漫之至。科學研究甚至發現，吃品質上乘的朱古力對身心都有益處，這無疑令吃朱古力所帶來的罪惡感一掃而空。

朱古力擁有悠久的歷史，遠至3000多年前的中亞美洲洲文化已有記載，史書亦有提到，製造朱古力的用料可可豆曾經是貨物交易的貨幣。古時，朱古力是重要的奢侈品，阿茲達克人便利用可可豆，加入興奮劑及令人恢復體力的材料，炮製出一種泡沫飲品供戰士、皇帝及教士飲用。及至17世紀，朱古力已成供歐洲皇室貴族享用的佳品。

可可豆亦曾用來製造酒精飲品，經發酵的朱古力飲品更曾於宗教儀式上使用，甚至與孕育之神拉上關係。

現時全球的可可豆產量中，三分之二來自西非。處理可可豆的程序絕不簡單，熟練的工人首先將已熟的豆莢從樹上摘下，再將豆莢翻開取出可可豆，放在太陽下曬乾，打包後送往加工。曬乾的可可豆隨後經過烘焙，再加以研磨，得出一種粘稠味帶苦澀的汁液，甜味則是稍後才加入的。

有研究顯示，適量進食朱古力對健康有益，既能增強腦部功能，又可延緩衰老。此外，朱古力亦含有不少抗氧化物，以及有助防止蛀牙的單寧。每日吃少量高品質的黑朱古力，更可促進血液循環及降低膽固醇，以及有助運動後肌肉復原。

吃朱古力令人心情喜悅，美味當然是原因之一，但更有說吃朱古力可勾起假期及愉快的回憶。據科學研究指，朱古力能誘發身體釋放腦內啡，這種化學物質能令人輕鬆愉快，產生暖意的感覺。

朱古力內含的抗氧化物，其產生的歡愉感覺甚至能媲美深情一吻。研究人員將電極接駁到年輕情侶身上，當他們吃黑朱古力時便測量他們的心跳，並以此數據來比較接吻時的心跳率。令人驚訝的是，朱古力竟比接吻還要厲害，當朱古力於口中溶化時，腦中所有部份都獲得刺激，接吻雖亦能刺激心跳，但效力並不持久。

購買朱古力時，記緊查閱當中的成份，品質好的朱古力，朱古力含量較高，最好的朱古力含有50-70%的可可豆成份。外觀方面，高質素的朱古力色澤平均，顏色要呈深沈的紅褐色，並避免有任何斑紋、污點、裂縫或氣孔。

當可可油（油脂）含量越高，朱古力便越快溶化。因此，將品質優良的朱古力放在手上，頃刻便會溶化。氣味方面，上乘的朱古力氣味平均，不會令人產生過甜的感覺，而其氣味深沉同時令人感覺華貴。

若朱古力的可可油含量高，碎裂時會有清脆的響聲；若加入植物油或其他油脂，那朱古力碎裂時便會顯得散碎。

最後，當然是入口的味道，優質的朱古力感覺如絲柔滑，在口中溶化時能散發出令人難忘的味道。

上乘的朱古力猶如美酒佳釀，令感官都能盡情享受其獨有的滋味，一般的朱古力難以相比。

And if you think you feel happier after eating chocolate, there's a reason for that, too. It tastes good, so that's always a positive. Chocolate evokes fond memories of holidays and happy occasions, but more importantly, eating it releases endorphins, a natural chemical that elevates mood by helping to induce a warm inner glow.

The thrill from the antioxidants is even said to rival that of a passionate kiss. Researchers put electrodes on young couples to test their heart rate when eating dark chocolate, and compared this to kissing. Surprisingly, they said, chocolate won the day. All areas of the brain were stimulated when the chocolate melted on their tongues. Kissing did increase the heart rate, but not for as long.

When choosing chocolate, check the ingredients. The better the chocolate, the higher the chocolate content. The best chocolate has 50-70 per cent cocoa solids in the ingredient list.

Appearance-wise, good chocolate should have an even colour. Look for a dark or mahogany brown without streaks, blemishes, cracks, or air holes.

Touch it. If you hold a piece of chocolate between your fingers, it should begin to melt in a few seconds. The more cocoa butter (fat content) the chocolate contains, the faster it will melt.

How's the aroma? Good chocolate smells amazing – well-balanced and not overly sweet. Look for a rich and heady aroma, something that feels extravagant. These are signs of good quality.

You can tell a lot about chocolate by the way it feels when you break off a piece. A clean snap shows a high quantity of cocoa butter. If vegetable fats or other fats have been used, the chocolate will tend to crumble or splinter.

Finally, the taste test. How chocolate feels in your mouth is one of the keys. It should be smooth and velvety, melting in your mouth with a delicious explosion of flavour.

Luxury chocolate is a feast for all the senses. Like fine wine or an excellent meal, it is an experience to be savoured. Once you've found it, ordinary chocolate will never again be the same.