

Sweet ways to your sweetie's sweet tooth

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THERE was no shortage of Valentine's chocolate at last month's 33rd Winter Fancy Food Show in San Diego.

Inventive packaging, unusual flavor combinations and sustainable harvesting techniques typified the offerings from artisanal chocolatiers who introduced their new products to the chocolate lovers of the world. Here is a sampling of the best:

- Chuao (Chew-WOW) Chocolatier is the creation of Venezuelan brothers Michael and Richard Antonorsi, who get their criollo cacao from their ancestral cacao growing region of Venezuela.

Their entry into the Valentine's aphrodisiac sweepstakes is an elegant two-tiered, crimson red "Jewelry Box" filled with gorgeous bonbons (\$45 for 15 pieces; \$67 for 32 pieces) containing such unusual ingredients as chevre and black pepper.

Chuao's "ChocoPod," a cross between a bar and a bonbon, has an unusual endorsement — from WeightWatchers.

At less than 60 calories per serving it is a sweet-tooth indulgence that won't sabotage even the most spartan diet plan.

Unexpected fillings such as Cabernet caramel and banana brown sugar provide a mouthful of virtuous satisfaction.

Available at Whole Foods, Safeway, Crate & Barrel, and at <http://www.chuaochocolatier.com>.

- Amano Artisan Chocolate began its ascent into the premium chocolate market with the help of professional chefs.

Amano's founder Art Pollard buys premium cacao beans from farmers in Venezuela and Madagascar and produces his small-batch chocolate bars at a factory in the Rocky Mountain town of Orem, Utah.

Pollard's years of painstaking research and development are summed up in his belief that "There are no shortcuts to making exquisite chocolate." Amano's rich, balanced, and complex premium dark chocolate is the proof of that commitment.

Made in limited quantities to guarantee maximum freshness and flavor, the superior quality and creamy mouth feel of these outrageously decadent bars make them a special indulgence for a special someone.

Assorted 2-ounce bars run \$6.95 each and are available at <http://www.amanochocolate.com>.

- Charles Chocolates of Emeryville puts a new spin on the saying that "Life is like a box of chocolates," because for them, the box is the chocolate.

Almost too beautiful to eat, each of their edible chocolate boxes contain a themed selection of handmade confections such as the Fresh Orange & Lemon Marzipan collection (19 ounces, \$45) — marzipan handmade from organic fruit and California almonds, coated in rich bittersweet chocolate.

A special collection of tea-infused chocolate truffles (17 ounces, \$60) is the result of a collaboration between Charles Chocolates and Berkeley's Teance Fine Teas.

Custom blends of premium chocolate complement each individual tea, including Jasmine, Lichee and Osmanthus.

The Heart Collection doesn't come in a chocolate box but offers two dozen heart-shaped bonbons filled with raspberry, passion fruit, and mojito (5.6 ounces, \$30).

Charles Chocolates offers tours and tastings at their Emeryville factory. Sign up through their Web site at <http://www.charleschocolates.com>. Available online and at Diablo Foods in Lafayette, The Pasta Shop and Andronico's in Berkeley.

- In search of a treat that stimulates the senses in a different way this Valentine's Day? Well, here's a puzzle for you: If you can drink your chocolate, why can't you eat your coffee?

Chocolatier Mark Izzo and marketer Kathy Niness set out to answer that question with the creation of Caffe Acapella, a company offering creamy bars as indulgent as fine chocolate but made from fresh roasted gourmet coffee beans, cocoa butter, sugar and milk.

Caffe Acapella flavors range from the caffeine wallop of Espresso Serenade and the sweet buttery crunch of Toffee Espresso Concerto to the milder experience of Cappuccino Connoisseur and the bold but smooth caramel richness of Caramel Macchiato Classico (2.25-ounce bars run \$2.99).

Available at <http://www.acapellafoods.com>, at Raley's Nob Hill stores and Danville's La Buena Vida.

- Moonstruck Chocolate Company's latest Valentine offerings includes a charming collection of four truffles hand-decorated with letters that spell out the word CARE (\$12).

For romantics of a more literary bent, the Collectible Valentine Chocolate Novel is an assortment of 15 truffles bound together with a special love story in a red collectible novel (\$40).

If the object of your affection is both salty and sweet, Moonstruck's Sea Salt Caramel Valentine Collection is a sure winner (nine pieces, \$18). Available at Moonstruck Cafe in Walnut Creek and at <http://www.moonstruckchocolate.com>.

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