

Fantasy recipe: add shirtless chef to chocolate

By Ruth Ostrow

IT'S like something out of a fabulous European movie. There's a knock at my door and in walks local chocolate maker Dean Agic carrying every girl's fantasy -- boxes and boxes of chocolate, chocolate powder, chocolates containing lavender oil and pink peppercorn, chocolate fig truffles.

Back to the car and he brings in the ingredients for the main meal he'll be preparing -- duck stuffed with orange, nuts, berries and chocolate.

He stands at my kitchen sink pulling various bottles, potions and oils out of bags and lining the benches with pots and pans. "I am going to be cooking for a couple of hours if that's okay. Do you mind if take my shirt off?" he asks, not waiting for a response. He grins brazenly when he glimpses my expression.

Before he starts cooking he hands me a drink which looks like black silk. It has been simmering while he's been setting up -- thick dark chocolate infused with a range of seductive ingredients including rose-petal essence, cinnamon and chilli. The exquisite taste and the fact there is a gorgeous near-naked man in my kitchen makes me flush from head to toe.

"I can see you are having a physiological response," he smiles. "Chocolate is filled with many substances that stimulate the release of PEA and oxytocin into the blood. These hormones mimic feelings of being in love, we need them for bliss and overall wellbeing," he says as I close my eyes and fall into ecstasy.

It all started a few weeks earlier. I had gone in to Dean's shop, Chocolat @ the Byron Bay Chocolate Factory, for my weekly fix. Usually not in the shop as he travels between Byron and his stores in Sydney, he happened to be standing at the counter. I blurted out how guilty I always felt buying chocolate.

"My Chinese doctor says chocolate is poisonous," I told him. Not to be upstaged by the health experts, he pulled out some facts of his own.

"The British Medical Journal lists the cocoa plant as the number one food source on the planet holding more vitamins, minerals and enzymes than any other single plant. The bean contains theobromine, calcium, phosphorous, potassium, caffeine, iron, sodium, carbohydrates, proteins, fats, thiamine, vitamin A, magnesium, riboflavin, zinc, copper and chromium," he said, reading from a brochure. "Phenyl ethylamine or PEA helps to reduce heart disease and blocks pain. Endorphins which are stimulated by chocolate lift mood and can be an antidepressant."

Already convinced, I told him I was more worried about the fat content.

Again he dismissed common beliefs.

"Compound chocolate is made with vegetable fat and needs a lot of sugar to replace the bad taste and is very weight gaining. This is not chocolate and is what gives chocolate a bad name. It is used in most bulk low grade chocolate bars.

"Real chocolate contains cocoa fats and cocoa butter -- these are similar to avocado fats and are very good for you. If you have dark chocolate without the milk or cream fillings you are actually doing your metabolism a favour.

"Organic or well-grown chocolate contains free radicals, anti-cancer agents, and properties that help normalise blood fats and syndromes like pre-menstrual tension," he said.

Free of guilt, I was just about to order my favourite chocolates: orange peel, lime rind and strawberries dipped in dark chocolate, when Dean came up with a better idea.

"How about I come over and prepare you an entire chocolate meal and you can see how it all works?"

There are times when you know you've done something right in a past life and this was one of them. And so -- like a male version of the Juliet Binoche character in the film Chocolat -- here is the Prince of Pleasure in my very own kitchen.

``The secret ingredient that makes my chocolate so special is the love I put into them," says Dean, who started making chocolate in the '90s and is now looking to expand his retail concerns around the country and to franchise abroad.

Trained in ancient healing, Dean says he was adopted by a local Aboriginal community and taught to use shamanic techniques. ``I put sacred prayers and healing into the chocolates," he says, placing a range of crystals, an eagle feather, and other trinkets around the kitchen as the duck cooks in the oven.

He starts chanting some wonderful ancient song before handing me the hot chocolate drink and watching my heated reaction. We spend the rest of the evening by candlelight, sampling the most amazing flavours -- truffles stuffed with nutmeg, cinnamon, and orange, white chocolate with coffee beans and chilli, with a range of sensual textures.

And I am forced to concede that there is something about indulging in this degree of pleasure that feels so healthy.

I do conclude that the odd wickedly euphoric substance (in moderation) can do wonders for the soul. The next day I feel completely energised which gives us all the green light to indulge a bit this Christmas and New Year, and to put the vital ingredient of pleasure back into health.

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