

The Chocolate Problems of Valentine's Day

Jed Oelbaum | Feb. 13, 2015



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Every Valentine's Day, cuddly, cooing lovers exchange gifts of chocolate, a confection known for its association with love since the days of Montezuma, who would load up on the supposed aphrodisiac before marathon sex sessions with his harem. Americans buy a staggering 58 million pounds of the brown stuff during the week leading up to February 14th, supposedly second in sales only to perennial Valentine's favorite "conversation hearts," a très-romantic candy made from (I can only assume) recycled chalk nubs from elementary school classrooms. But no one actually looks forward to a gift of crappy novelty candy; chocolate bears the advantage of actually being delicious, and the heart-shaped box of truffles or bonbons is still, to

many, an archetypal symbol of the holiday, and even of romantic love itself.

But all is not well in the world of chocolate. Plant disease and poor growing conditions, paired with new, rocketing demand for the commodity in Asia have caused something of a mini-shortage this year. Newly minted foodie aficionados have also been driving up standards for the cocoa content of their treats, exacerbating the problem and kicking up prices as supplies are stretched to their limits. We can see this in effect as dark chocolate booms in popularity and many packages now feature the candy's cocoa content as a prime selling point. Some experts say we may be facing a legitimate, irreversible global shortage by 2020 unless serious steps are taken now. Not so romantic! The Guardian's Katy Salter lays it out, envisioning a dire future for chocoholics: "Chocolate lovers everywhere have a vested interest in preserving what's left—even if it means making like the Buckets in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, and pooling our pennies for the precious taste of one small bar when prices shoot through the roof."

Despite increasing cocoa quantities in our chocolate bars, issues of questionable purity and alleged health hazards are also popping up this year. Once thought of purely as junk food, in recent years, chocolate has been developing a better reputation, as a host of health benefits—including blood pressure regulation, and a lowered risk of high cholesterol and dementia—has been associated with its consumption. But according to non-profit California watchdog group **As You Sow**, many popular chocolate products contain unsafe levels of lead and cadmium, heavy metals that accumulate in the body and can cause serious health problems, especially for children. The organization argues that under California's 1986 proposition 65 laws, which require state businesses to notify consumers of any exposure to toxic chemicals, the chocolate should be labeled as potentially hazardous. Industry spokespeople tell the Washington Post that lead and cadmium are present in minimal amounts in many agricultural products, and that their



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chocolate contains levels that are consistent with regulatory norms. So, you know, just the usual amount of lead, no big deal.



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But a 2005 University of California Santa Cruz study backs up **As You Sow**'s claims, finding levels of lead in most manufactured chocolate products as "among the highest reported for all foods." According to the study, "One source of contamination of the finished products is tentatively attributed to atmospheric emissions of leaded gasoline." The Post asked Eleanne Van Vliet, director of toxic chemicals research for **As You Sow**, how she "felt about ruining Valentine's Day." "We're not ruining Valentine's Day. We're just making a more informed, happier, healthier consumer," she said. "Because who would want to give their sweetie heavy metals?"

These and other serious issues facing the chocolate business will surely not help the already high levels of anxiety experienced by many people around Valentine's Day. Is your lover a chocolate superfan, eagerly awaiting his or her dozen red roses and cardiac muscle-shaped box of sweet goodness? Or maybe he's been pining after some other popular holiday chocolate creation, like this year's sold-out Belgian breakout hit and sobering sign of the times, the edible chocolate anus. If so, one must face the dilemma of whether to indulge, acknowledging one's own participation in the end of chocolate as we know it and even worse, exposing a loved one to the threat of toxic substances. The lonely among us too, have to decide whether to drown their sorrows in the traditional after-valentine's-day candy sale gorge-a-thon. Knowing how scarce the once-ubiquitous treat may soon be, should you just enjoy as much as you can while it lasts, damn the consequences? Either way, this Valentine's Day, stay conscious of your chocolate choices, and if you do end up opting to forego the deep, sensual, decadent lure of the cocoa bean, remember there are plenty of other symbols of your undying love to pick from, like plant sex organs, shiny rocks, and, of course, bears.