

CHOC-ODDITIES

The rich flavor of cocoa is at home with the unlikeliest companions.

By Lisa Waterman Gray — [Chow Town/Kansas City Star](#) — May 6, 2015

With Mother's Day on Sunday, many spouses and children are likely to rely on the old standby: the gift of chocolate.

But beyond the tried-and-true box of chocolate-covered cherries, the naturally rich, earthy and seductive character of cocoa can also be used to enhance an unexpected array of dishes.

Consider chocolate-zucchini muffins or a classic Mexican mole. Or even more unusual pairings, such as chocolate-dipped bacon or chocolate hummus (a variation on a Nutella theme). Yes, some pairings may sound odd, but they make sense on the palate.

As a general rule salty and spicy foods work well when paired with white, milk and dark chocolate, says Rachel Freeman, chocolatier at Annedore's Fine Chocolates in Westwood Hills. She adores bacon and dark chocolate, or potato chips covered in milk chocolate.

Although Marcel Bollier, owner of Andre's Confiserie Suisse with locations in Kansas City and Leawood, isn't a fan of chocolate-dipped chips, he agrees that sea salt and caramel complement dark chocolate because the sweetness of the caramel is subdued by the salt.

When covered in dark chocolate, the spiciness of ginger is also a well-balanced combination. Meanwhile, chiles infuse Venezuelan Spice Turtles from Christopher Elbow Artisanal Chocolate with plenty of heat. He also has an ice cream collaboration with Häagen-Dazs that incorporates the spiced pecan turtle with chocolate ice cream.

"Dark chocolate has such a strong flavor and presence that it can stand up very well to bold spices," says Elbow, whose headquarters is in the Crossroads Arts District. "The fruitiness of dark chocolate really helps balance the heat in chiles."

For a more classic pairing, Andre's infuses chocolates with scotch, bourbon, cognac or kirsch. "I think the alcohol by itself enhances the flavor of the chocolate and the liquor," Bollier says.

Freeman of Annedore's agrees: "If a more complex liquor, like a scotch or whiskey, is added to dark chocolate, the natural earthy notes in the dark chocolate become much more pronounced.

"Fruit purees and liquors also complement dark chocolate but need to be used more intensely so the dark chocolate doesn't overpower the," she adds. "For instance, using a raspberry puree in a dark chocolate bonbon would need the addition of, say, Chambord

to prevent the raspberry flavor from being lost.”

Fruit-based liqueurs also enhance and bring out the natural fruitiness of milk chocolate.

“When liqueurs are added to the center of a truffle or bonbon, the milk chocolate base gets a surprise flavor kick,” Freeman says. “The creaminess of milk chocolate...provides smoothness for coffee and liqueurs.”

Meanwhile, dark chocolate accepts stronger, more intense flavor combinations, such as citrus, without losing its own unique profile.

“The vanilla content and the bitter flavor of the chocolate add a wonderful aroma and combine well with the acid of the citrus,” Bollier says. “I personally feel like chocolate doesn’t lend itself well to any other sour fruit.”

But in another surprise twist, some bakers and confectioners think chocolate can work well with beer.

“I prefer a much darker chocolate (75 percent or more cacao) with a malt forward, less hoppy beer such as a doppelbeck or a rich porter or stout,” Elbow says. “The only thing to watch out for is if the chocolate is too sweet, it can amplify the bitterness of some beers.”

At Dolce Bakery in Prairie Village, owner Erin Brown’s seasonal Dark Truth Stout Brownie Trifles and Chocolate Guinness Cake (available in March) have gained an avid fan base. Both incorporate Boulevard Brewing Co. beers.

“For me chocolate is so earthy and not super sweet and the (richness) gives a foundation of flavor,” Brown says. “I think (the Guinness Cake) appeals to the beer and chocolate lover as unique pairing.

“Stout is delicious, and you get some coffee notes,” she says. “The richness of the brownie texture enhances (the beer flavor) and you definitely taste both; the beer stands up next to the chocolate.” Dark Truth Stout Brownie Trifles will return to the menu in time for Father’s Day.

When you really start to think about it, there seems to be no end to chocolate pairings.

Elbow Chocolates walks on the wild side with the addition of popping candy to a signature chocolate bar. “Chocolate works so well with the popping candy because of the play on textures,” Elbow says. “As the chocolate melts very smoothly, the candy begins to dissolve, and you get the popping and crunchy sensation.”

Elbow and his staff are working to pair chocolate with different cheeses, too; they have done a chocolate and cheese pairing at Green Dirt Farms in Weston. “We hit on some really interesting flavor combinations,” he says.

Fans can expect something cheesy and chocolate-y in the shop soon.

Chocolate also works well with savory ingredients, such as a classic Mexican mole. Patrick Ryan, chef/owner of Port Fonda in Westport, makes a complex mole sauce with

chocolate for pollo enchiladas.

“Some moles contain chocolate, but there are plenty that do not,” he says. “In a classic mole rojo, chocolate is added for a bit of sweetness, complexity and depth to the sauce. We use Abuelita brand chocolate that has some cinnamon flavor added.”

By now you might be wondering if there’s any food or drink that doesn’t work with chocolate?

Try these odd chocolate recipes — from chocolate-flavored chicken tacos to avocado-laced truffles — and you’re sure to get creativity points with mom – or dad. After all, Father’s Day is on June 21.

Recipes available on request.