

It's still no closer to being named "an essential food group," but chocolate lovers who had long suspected that it was essential to their well-being can finally celebrate.

But really — is chocolate almost as good as sex? Consider this: A recent Canadian poll indicated that men thought sex was almost five times more important than chocolate, but that women thought chocolate and sex were of equal importance. Yet some men may be re-examining their priorities. When Jim Belushi came to Dallas to help open the House of Blues, he called ahead to make sure he could have his favorite chocolate from Trinidad. Noka, a chocolatier near the W Hotel, happily prepared a box for the visiting actor, according to store manager Kenley Lim. The store — which has only one other retail outlet, in Tokyo — also made up a special dark chocolate package for Mr. Belushi's Blues Brother, Dan Ackroyd.

Clearly, the rich and famous have figured out what mere mortals have long known: The food of the gods is more than a treat.

For starters, a few bites of chocolate contain natural chemicals that have been found to decrease systolic blood pressure. Those phenolic compounds in a 1.5-ounce chocolate bar offer about the same amount of benefit as does a 5-ounce serving of red wine in reducing the risk of coronary heart disease.

And in addition to combating cell damage from free radicals, other studies point favorably to dark chocolate's high chromium content, which may help control blood sugar.

Another recent finding came as no surprise to many women who crave a bite of the dark stuff for an emotional lift: Chocolate contains anandamide, a chemical that mimics marijuana's soothing effects on the brain.

The word is out. Dark chocolate sales are climbing. Tom O'Brien, the chocolate buyer at Central Market in Dallas, has been busy satisfying the surge in demand for dark chocolate. The selection — and the shelf space — is growing, as manufacturers are pumping out innovative products for a new breed of consumers who hunger to know more about their beans. They want to know the country of origin, the variety of beans and the composition of the blend.

Even the descriptions on the packages sound more akin to wine or coffee marketing.

The Hershey Co., for example, introduced in

## SOME SCIENCE TO DIGEST

**What's in a name? Pay attention now. *T. cacao* is a species of the *Theobroma* tree, so the word "cacao" refers to the beans from those trees. Cacao becomes cocoa after the beans are processed to yield chocolate liquor, cocoa butter and cocoa powder.**

**Chocolate liquor is also known as unsweetened chocolate. Cocoa butter is a natural fat that gives chocolate its unique mouth feel. Cocoa powder is made by removing part of the cocoa butter from the bean and grinding the remaining material to a powder.**

**The combination of chocolate liquor, cocoa butter and cocoa powder are called cocoa solids. In Europe, chocolates must be labeled by percent of cacao to indicate the minimum total cocoa solids by weight. In America, chocolate manufacturers are not required to declare the percent of cacao, but many do in order to satisfy consumer interest.**

Source: Chocolate Manufacturers Association

late 2006 small squares called Cacao Reserve, which according to a company statement, lets "consumers explore different subtleties and intensities of chocolate." Those varieties include "Santo Domingo (67 percent cacao): Rich dark chocolate with an intriguing wine and spice character, and Sao Tome (70 percent cacao): A blend of rich aromas and subtle spices for a dark, distinct taste."

Mr. Lim says Nova's chocolates are even higher levels of purity — more like 75 percent cacao.

"The reason white chocolate gets such a bad rap," Mr. Lim says, is because it is no more than 50 percent cacao. That means at least half of the candy is sugar and additives.

In July, Hershey — already the U.S. leader in dark chocolate sales — and Starbucks Coffee Co. teamed up to create a premium chocolate that will be sold under the Starbucks brand starting this fall.

Thinking about a short Indonesian espresso to accompany that nugget of Costa Rican dark? Sounds like a caffeine overdose, but experts say it's not. Turns out that chocolate is not a serious stimulant. Instead, too much sugar in your truffle may be the culprit. The amount of caffeine in a typical 1.4-ounce chocolate bar or an 8-ounce glass of chocolate milk is about the same as a cup of decaffeinated coffee.

So are you feeling an irresistible urge for a dark indulgence, that singular sensational taste-

scent combination that only chocolate can deliver? You're not alone.

"Women who crave chocolate appear to do so because of its enjoyable sensory properties — smell, taste and mouth feel. They also appear to have positive psychological associations with the food," says Mindy Kurzer, Ph.D., a nutritionist at the University of Minnesota.

Low levels of serotonin in the brain can lead to craving for starches and sugars, like chocolate candy, to boost the serotonin. Endorphin levels also lift mood, and they appear to be affected by dietary fat. So it's likely to be the sugar and the fat in the candy bar that you crave — not the cacao beans.

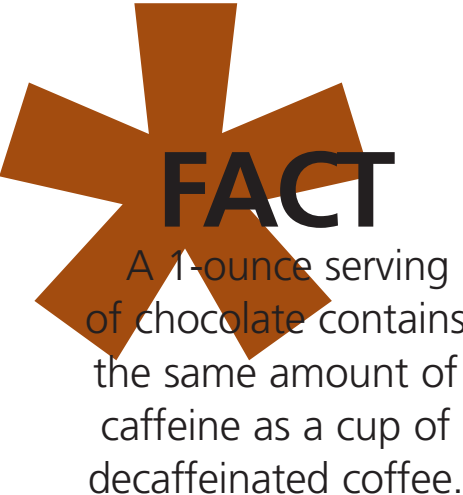
No one is suggesting yet that an ounce of chocolate a day will keep the doctor away, but there are plenty of good reasons to go dark.

Resist anything with buttery, sugary additions, like caramel and coconut goo, and stick as close to the pure beans as possible. You may be doing your body a favor.

Mr. Lim says some chocolate manufacturers use nuts and fruits like strawberries to disguise the inferior quality of the chocolate.

The American Heart Association stops short of advocating its consumption, you might want to nibble on this: "There is currently no established serving size of chocolate to reap these cardiovascular benefits," the organization says. "However, what we do know is you no longer need to feel guilty if you enjoy a small piece of dark chocolate once in awhile."

So whether you consider yourself an all-out chocoholic or a refined connoisseur, indulge your passion. Just be sure to toss the wrapper in the trash. ■



**FACT**  
A 1-ounce serving  
of chocolate contains  
the same amount of  
caffeine as a cup of  
decaffeinated coffee.

Source: Chocolate Manufacturers Association