



Wednesday, Feb. 14, 2007

How Valentine's Day Conquered Japan

By Toko Sekiguchi/Tokyo

Ask any self-respecting Japanese woman what she has planned for Valentine's, and she'll tell you that it's all been set — the chocolates, gifts, and dinner, all prepared and paid for, by her. On *Barentain Dei*, women take the initiative to shower their *honmei* or sweethearts with gifts, profess their love, and humor their male classmates and colleagues with *giri-choco* or obligation chocolates. For teenagers it's a bittersweet initiation into romance and courtship, where girls brave a few burns to learn the art of tempering molten chocolate to create one-of-a-kind treats for the captain of the baseball team. For the more weathered, it's about raiding Godiva for their lovers and husbands, and picking up cheaper consolation prizes for the lesser males in their lives. The men, by the way, don't have to do a thing for the women on Feb. 14. Not till Mar. 14, but more on that later.

How a lovers' holiday in the west turned into a quasi-feminist chocolate orgy is unclear. The the first Valentine's sale in Japan took place in 1958 and Tokyo chocolatier Mary Chocolate's event generated 150 yen total in sales (the company sold three bars of chocolate in three days). Nevertheless, the marketing opportunity would not be lost in translation. According to the Chocolate & Cocoa Association of Japan, of the \$3.6 billion annual sale of chocolate in 2005 (the latest available year), \$400 million, or over 10% was spent during the crucial days leading up to Valentine's. This year, Japanese men who receive super high-end American brand chocolates such as Noka and Compartes should revel in the fact that their significant other had the time, money and taste to settle for nothing but the best for their men.

There is so much love expressed in excessively packaged goodies — literally — that this year the deputy environment minister is promoting "Eco Choco," encouraging shoppers forego extra ribbon or glittery tissue. Some other consumerist stats: one survey showed that nearly 80% of women in their 20s and 30s will be purchasing chocolate on Valentine's. Women spend about \$20 for their truffle-worthy *honmei*,

and an obligatory \$6 each for their sweet-toothed coworkers, of which the average Japanese female knows six. That roughly comes out to \$56 per woman, not to mention the accompanying gifts (\$66 on average) and the fancy dinners that she pays for.

So is there choco-fatigue? About 70% of the women polled in one survey wish the custom of doling out *giri-choco* to their male bosses and colleagues would just end. Moreover, according to one poll, 58% felt that Cupid brought the blues, not because of a lack of dates but because of all the preparation involved. That would include, for example, standing in line for half an hour in the freezing cold to get their hands on that \$55 box of four chocolate bonbons. Morinaga, a leading chocolate maker, has research showing that an increasing number of women in their 20s are now fighting the chocolate mission creep by making their own treats instead.

Men do not get an entirely free ride. In the late 1970s a number of confectionary company CEOs got together to try to figure out how to get a piece of the chocolate pie. Their equal opportunity marketing gimmick was to come up with "White Day" on March 14th, where the men are obliged to reciprocate for their Valentine's gifts by purchasing candies and cookies. Easy enough? Well, maybe not. Expectations have grown since the 70s. According the polls, what women expect on White Day, in order of preference, are jewelry, watches, and handbags. Van cleef & Arpels, Cartier and Louis Vuitton are not complaining.