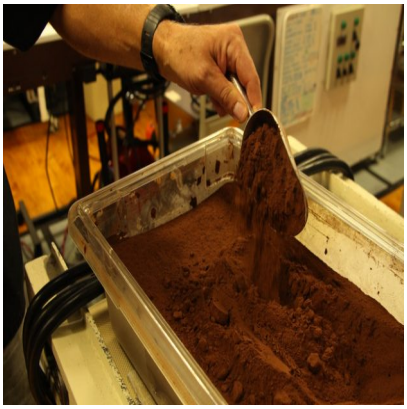

Chocolate Reserve

Description

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It often pays off to stash a little chocolate â?? and cocoa â?? in the cupboard. The confectionery staples embellish everything and cool weather calls for cocoa.

To those who temper chocolate, temperature matters beyond the chocolate thermometer. As autumn arrives, chocolate delicacies hold up longer, while demand from chocolate lovers increases.

When temperatures dipped, Alps Sweet Shop stepped up chocolate production. The family business, which has locations in Beacon and Fishkill, has handcrafted small-batch fine confections for more than 90 years. It was founded by Peter Charkalis and today is run by his granddaughter, Sally Charkalis-Craft, and her husband, Terry Craft, a master chocolatier.



Terry Craft, master chocolatier and co-owner of Alps Sweet Shop, pours 110 pounds of salted caramel onto a cooling tray at their Beacon location.

Customers streamed in to Beaconâ??s Main Street location last week to choose from sweets in cases brimming with chocolate-covered caramels, heaven-and-earth truffles, chocolate glace fruits, almond butter crunch and molded chocolates.

Terry Craft and his candy makers work year round but fall production keeps them in the kitchen even longer, stirring kettles bubbling with the likes of salted caramel and dark chocolate. He studied his craft in the U.S., Belgium, France, Canada and England, and although producing confections is labor intensive, he says he finds the work rewarding.

â??Itâ??s a feel-good type of business,â?• Craft said. â??People are either coming in here to make themselves happy or to make someone else happy.â?•

The recipes havenâ??t changed since Peter Charkalisâ??s day, but the production methods have evolved from the days when every morsel was handmade. Sallyâ??s mother, Mary Charkalis, recalled a turning point in 1968 when the shop bought its first piece of machinery, an enrober. Sallyâ??s grandfather was not happy about the purchase, so her father waited until he was on vacation in Greece to have it delivered. (He eventually came around to appreciate its benefits.)

An enrober â?? which moves confections down a conveyor belt, along a cold plate to set the bottom and then through a curtain of chocolate for coating â?? still stands ready in the Beacon shop. Alps has since further modernized its methods by purchasing an automated candy wrapper and computerized molding equipment.

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Like any connoisseur in matters of taste, Craft knows cocoa (or cacao, as it is more commonly known where itâ??s grown). He prefers a Criollo cocoa bean from Ecuador. The common Forastero bean is a close second but he says it doesnâ??t have the pronounced flavor. As a third option thereâ??s the Trinitario, a hybrid of the Criollo and the Forastero.

â??The best of the best [chocolatiers] can tell you while eating them not only what part of the world a bean is from but the region or plantation where theyâ??re grown,â?• Craft said. â??This particular plantation has a patented fermentation process and right now I have exclusive U.S. rights. These Ecuadorian Criollo beans are right off the plantation.â?• He cracked open a bean, removed the nib and gently crushed it.

â??The nib is where the excitement starts,â?• he explained. â??The nib is pressed and the cocoa butter is extracted and whatâ??s left is called the chocolate liquor,â?• the paste that serves as the essential ingredient for chocolate. Craft sells the Ecuadorian product to restaurants and pastry chefs as well as a microbrewer. He also coats whole beans in organic chocolate and recently filled an order for 25,000.

â??You can taste the earthiness, a savory touch, fruitiness and the soil of the region,â?• he said. â??And the cocoa bean is off the charts with its flavonoids and high in vitamins and minerals.â?•

Savor a piece of gourmet chocolate or make the cake recipe here that calls for cocoa powder and bits of chocolate. Some chip chocolates have a high melting point, so a better choice is a premium chocolate like the break-up bars that Alps produces in milk, dark and organic white chocolate.



Fragrant cocoa powder, Kahlua and rich chocolate enhance this Bundt cake.

Home cooks should be able to find small quantities of good cocoa at local markets. Natural unsweetened cocoa, non-alkalized, will be darker while alkalized will soften bitterness. Some cocoas may also affect rise and texture of a cake. This chocolate cake always pleases, thanks in part to flavorful chocolate, powerful cocoa and a dose of Kahlua.

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Chocolate Kahlua Cake

1 Â¼ cups sugar
1 Â¾ cups flour
1 Â½ teaspoons baking soda
1 teaspoon salt
Â½ cup natural unsweetened cocoa powder
4 eggs, beaten
16 ounces sour cream
Â¾ cups canola oil
â ? cup Kahlua
6 ounces chocolate, broken into small pieces

Glaze

2 tablespoons cocoa powder
3 cups powdered sugar
1 Â½ cups Kahlua

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Butter Bundt pan and dust with cocoa. Mix flour, cocoa powder, sugar, baking soda and salt. Add eggs, sour cream, oil and Kahlua. Stir thoroughly and fold in chocolate pieces. Pour batter into pan and bake 1 hour.

Whisk glaze ingredients and set aside.

Allow cake to cool, then invert. Pour glaze over cake and set 1 hour. Refrigerate if serving next day. Serve with fresh mint leaves.

Photos by M.A. Ebner, first published by *The Highlands Current*

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