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What's your favorite part of Valentine's Day? The cards? The flowers? Or the choooooo-late? Who doesn't love a little chocolate now and then? Chocolate is perhaps the most popular sweet treat in the world. As far as I can figure, my niece Emily is the only person on the planet who doesn't love chocolate. So with this one notable exception, Valentine's Day is the perfect time to share some love with a gift of chocolate.

Chocolate has been around in one form or another for centuries. It comes from the cacao tree or to use its fancy-pants name *Theobroma cacao*. Theobroma is Greek for "food of the gods" which more or less sums up this delightful delicacy. The cacao tree has been cultivated in Central and South America for at least three thousand years. The tree produces a pod-like fruit which is filled with seeds. For whatever reason, these seeds are usually referred to as beans and chocolate comes from these beans. Until the late 1800's the beans were processed into a liquid or a paste which was then used to make chocolate drinks.

The smooth, creamy bars we all crave today are a relatively modern invention. In 1879 Rodolfe Lindt, a twenty-four year old Swiss confectioner and entrepreneur, was determined to turn chocolate from a grainy and somewhat bitter substance into a luxurious treat. Young Rodolfe bought a fire-damaged factory and some second-hand equipment and began experimenting with chocolate paste, coco butter and sugar. Legend has it that he rushed out the door one Friday afternoon and left a mixer churning away with a batch of chocolate. When he returned on Monday he discovered a velvety smooth, luscious concoction.

This amazing, new chocolate could do much more than serve as a base of a slightly sweet, slightly bitter drink. It could be formed into bars and truffles. It could coat cherries and strawberries. It could be whipped into cream for a luscious mousse. I don't know if Herr Lindt was rushing off to take part in a yodeling contest, a ski weekend or a fondue. Whatever the reason, I for one am grateful for his absent mindedness and accidental discovery.

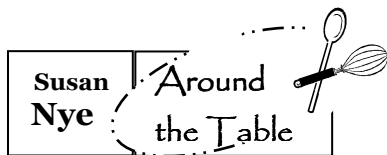
For years chocolate was given a bad rap. It was blamed for everything from weight gain to tooth decay and pimples. My friend Suzanne is a fierce defender of all things chocolate. In fact, she claims that chocolate is a vegetable. Her logic is simple. Since chocolate comes from the cocoa bean and beans are vegetables it stands to reason that chocolate is a vegetable. Furthermore, she strongly recommends that we all indulge as often as possible, preferably every day. Since Suzanne is half Swiss, my tendency is to believe her. Nutritionists agree that we should eat at least seven servings of fruits and vegetables every day; so why shouldn't chocolate be one of them?

Suzanne is not the only one expounding the healthy benefits of chocolate. In the past few years, scientists and nutritionist have been making all sorts of wonderful discoveries about chocolate. Research shows that chocolate has something called flavonoids. As far as I can figure out (I'm neither a scientist nor a nutritionist and easily befuddled and bored by big scientific words), flavonoids are an antioxidant and have a long list of health benefits. They are credited with everything from lower blood pressure to better skin (go figure!). They are also reputed to help prevent heart disease and cancer. Maybe we should appoint Willy Wonka as the next surgeon general!

So this Valentine's Day indulge a little. Enjoy some time with loved ones and share a chocolaty treat or two. Bon appétit!

Stay warm and dry and bon appétit!

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Susan'.



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Chocolate Mousse

*Don't skimp on the chocolate. Use top quality Swiss or artisanal chocolate for this
recipe; it's worth the extra expense. Happy Valentine's Day and enjoy!*

Serves 12

2 cups heavy cream
4 large egg yolks
3 tablespoons sugar
Pinch salt
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
1 teaspoon fine espresso powder (decaf is okay)
1 tablespoon Grand Marnier (optional)
7 ounces good bittersweet chocolate, chopped
Garnish: whipped cream

Put the chocolate in a small bowl.

Whisk 3/4 cup of cream, yolks, sugar and salt together in a 1-quart heavy saucepan.
Cook over low heat, stirring constantly until it registers 160 degrees on a
thermometer.

Pour the custard through a fine-mesh sieve into the bowl with the chocolate. Let
set for a few minutes; whisk to combine. Stir in the vanilla, espresso powder and
Grand Marnier and whisk to combine. Let cool complete and then transfer to the
refrigerator for 1-2 hours.

Beat remaining 1 1/4 cups of cream until it holds stiff peaks, cream should be very
cold. Whisk one quarter of the whipped cream into the chocolate custard; gently
fold in the remaining whipped cream.

Transfer the mousse to a serving bowl or into small dessert glasses. Refrigerate for
at least 6 hours before serving. Remove from the refrigerator about 20 minutes
before serving. Serve garnished with a small dab of whipped cream.