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Crafting Grand Cru Chocolates in Contemporary France

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Crafting *Grand Cru* Chocolates in Contemporary France

C'est un magasin où le chocolat règne en maître, traité par un maître. C'est du travail cent pour cent artisanal au sens "artist" du terme, qui sait tirer de la sublime fève d'Amérique la substantifique splendeur.¹

—*Le guide des croqueurs de chocolat*, 1988

I NOTED THE DISPLAY of Parisian master chocolatier Michel Chaudun in the window of his seventh arrondissement confectionery boutique when I arrived to interview him in late October 1990. It featured the lush tropical flora, tools, and raw materials associated with third-world cacao harvests. A framed text above assured customers that "notre chocolat provient des plus grands crus de cacao du monde" (our chocolate comes from the best cacao bean growths in the world). Next to this was a basin of liquid dark chocolate, specialized handicraft tools, and *Le guide des croqueurs de chocolat* (*The guide of chocolate eaters*) listing the "170 best chocolatiers of France," including Michel Chaudun. A photocopy of the guide page devoted to Michel Chaudun revealed that his chocolates rated an 18 out of 20 (see Figure 1).

Michel Chaudun greeted me at the door and ushered me into his tiny, elegant boutique. Inside, dark chocolate candies with evocative names like Esmeralda and Véragua were invitingly displayed on an open central island. A small hand-printed sign indicated the price per kilo: 340F, or roughly \$68. A stunning array of confectionery art, from baby bottles to life-size animals, was shelved alongside porcelain and crystal figurines, next to chic confectionery gift boxes (see Figure 2). The boutique décor combined neutral earthen tones and rich woods with an abundant use of mirrors. Through a door separating the boutique from the adjacent workshop a young craftsman, Chaudun's only full-time worker and former apprentice,

could be seen preparing a batch of house specialties. Next to him were newly coated rows of glossy, ebony-black chocolate bonbons. The intoxicating aroma of chocolate permeated the boutique whenever the workshop door opened.

Along its complex trajectory from cultivation and harvest in the third world to processing and consumption in the first world, chocolate is transformed and differentiated into many culturally relevant categories of food. In France these include breakfast breads, snacks, drink mixes, dessert cuisine, specialty candies which are sold as gifts, for personal consumption, and for ranking in connoisseur tastings, and finally, confectionery art.

In the 1980s Belgian producers of chocolate candies made a swift and successful incursion into the French market by specifically targeting the specialized niche



Figure 1

Michel Chaudun window display. Photo by Susan J. Terrio.

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Figure 2
Chaudun boutique interior. Photo by Susan J. Terrio.

dominated until then by French artisanal chocolatiers. Over the same period, European Community (EC) representatives prepared for the Maastricht Treaty by proposing a set of European norms of chocolate production which threatened to undercut existing French legislation. Facing the intensified international competition of the 1980s and heightened fears of increasingly centralized regulation, French chocolatiers and cultural taste makers attempted to stimulate new demand for craft commodities by promoting “genuine,” “grand cru,” or “vintage” French chocolate.² Despite the publication of a plethora of works on the logic of consumption in late capitalist societies and a recent volume on the increasing demand for culturally authentic, handicraft goods from developing nations among first-world consumers, little is known about the economic and sociocultural dimensions of craft commodity production in advanced capitalism.³ Few studies have examined the complex process whereby craft objects are culturally marked and endowed with social, aesthetic, and economic value as they are pro-

duced, exchanged, and consumed in postindustrial centers.

The exploration of the relationship between the elaboration of chocolate as a cultural commodity and the affirmation of national identity is important to consider in the wake of EC unification. The 1992 ratification of the Maastricht Treaty by a slim margin of French voters and the hostility it continues to generate among many British people are only two examples of the ambivalence engendered by the creation of a unified Europe. One of the strategies chosen by EC bureaucrats to forge a closer union among factious member nations has been to create a pan-nationalism grounded in a common European culture and shared cultural symbols (Shore and Black 1992).

Attempts in Brussels to build and impose a universal European culture threatened to undermine a notion of French culture defined in identical terms. A universalist notion of civilization still survives in France and is strongly linked to the view that French culture itself best embodies it (Rigby 1991). Many French people see their achievements in literature, philosophy, and the arts, both high and popular, as evidence of this. Moreover, the French state and its representatives take seriously the protection of their language and cultural forms from intrusive foreign influences. Current debates on the ubiquitous spread of English and the effect of European norms on traditional foods such as cheese illustrate this. Thus, even as France asserts her diplomatic, political, and economic presence in the “new” Europe, the arena of culture remains highly charged and contested.

On the eve of 1993, French chocolatiers and taste makers responded to repeated calls for European uniformity in various areas by invoking the uniqueness of their cultural products as exemplified in the specifically French “art” of chocolate making. This art was grounded in superior aesthetic standards and in the preeminence of French culinary arts and skilled artisanship, both constituent elements and potent emblems of French culture. Thus French chocolate, one of the commodities that connote the value of traditional craft production and the prestige of haute cuisine, provides a means of investigating the production of taste and its relation to key elements at the core of contemporary French culture.

Artisanal Chocolate Production: The Past as Present

It is perhaps wise to begin with a description of contemporary chocolate businesses and a brief discussion of the evolution of both the craft and French patterns of confectionery consumption. Despite a continuous restructuring of the craft since chocolate was introduced to France in the late 16th century, the arrival of Belgian chocolate franchise outlets in France in the 1980s was

reported as a unique event. It served as an important catalyst in the creative reinvention of chocolate candies as prestige cultural commodities. The organization of artisanal chocolate businesses like Chaudun's reveals the continuing salience of certain "traditional" work and social forms such as skilled craft production and independent entrepreneurship. Family members, both blood relations and in-laws, control daily business operations, which usually include two complementary and mutually reinforcing activities: sales and production. These businesses also adhere to a strictly gendered division of labor according to which men generally produce goods in the private space of the workshop and women sell them in the public sphere of the adjacent boutique. Skill is transmitted largely through experiential training and work is organized hierarchically, according to skill and experience, under the authority of the craftsman-owner in the workshop and his wife in the boutique.

Through their window displays and boutique interiors, French chocolatiers actively capitalize on the enduring association between contemporary artisanal production and the idealized, aestheticized image of a "traditional," premodern France.⁴ This image evokes a "simpler," "better" time when family workshops provided the exclusive context within which a solidaristic community of uniformly skilled masters guaranteed the production of quality goods. French masters like Chaudun celebrate contemporary craftsmanship while linking it to a rich past of preindustrial guild traditions. Chaudun's elaborate pieces of confectionery art (see Figure 3) recall the masterpieces (*chefs d'oeuvre*) completed as a necessary rite of passage in French craft guilds and journeymen brotherhood associations (*compagnonnage*) (Coornaert 1966; Sewell 1980). The small size of Chaudun's boutique evokes the traditional artisanal shop and its place in a distinctively French national tradition of small-scale, skill-based family modes of entrepreneurship. The display of raw materials and artisanal tools reinforces, for the consumers' benefit, the human labor embodied in the goods. House candies are handmade on the premises by Michel Chaudun. The creation and prominent public presentation of individually named candies, as well as the culinary guide rating his chocolates, invoke a renowned French gastronomic heritage based on taste and aesthetics. Chaudun is not only a master craftsman but also a master chef.

At the same time, Chaudun's business is a testament to the changes that have transformed the craft of artisanal chocolate production. Progressive mechanization over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries provoked a two-stage restructuring of the craft. Initially, small- and medium-sized family chocolatiers who mechanized their workshops displaced craftsmen manually producing chocolate from cacao beans. These small-scale family producers were in turn definitively displaced by large-

scale industrial manufacturers. By the 1950s the skills associated with the production of chocolate from cacao beans had shifted entirely to industrialized mass production. The craft of chocolate production was redefined and its skills came to center exclusively on the fabrication of dipped chocolate candies, molded chocolate figurines and, most recently, confectionery art. Currently, artisanal chocolatiers occupy a specialized niche within a fully industrialized sector; they purchase industrially manufactured blocks of chocolate and transform them into a personalized line of goods.⁵

In France, chocolate candies are purchased primarily as gifts and distributed to relatives, friends, and colleagues at significant social occasions. The purchase of artisanal candies is embedded within stylized gifting relations and remains closely linked to seasonal and ceremonial occasions such as private rite-of-passage observances



Figure 3

This lamp, crafted from chocolate and sugar, won first place in a national contest held in Paris, 1990. Photo by Susan J. Terrio.

and religious holidays such as Christmas and Easter. Until quite recently, French customers of family confectionery businesses purchased equal numbers of dark and milk chocolate candies as gifts, chose from fewer house specialties, saw virtually no confectionery art, and had no specialized culinary guides with which to rate the best French chocolates. A series of developments in the 1980s coalesced to effect considerable change.

During the 1970s and 1980s, competition increased and patterns of confectionery consumption changed. The purchase of artisanally produced candies for distribution as gifts increased modestly in the 1970s but stagnated at virtually the same level in the 1980s (Casella 1989). In contrast, the sale of mass-produced chocolate products registered a significant increase. Over the same period, foreign multinationals, including the American (Mars) and the Swiss (Lindt) companies, came to dominate the French market for mass-produced chocolate products.

In addition, from the early 1980s on, Belgian franchise outlets specifically targeted the market for confectionery gifts by selling mass-produced chocolate candies in store fronts that closely resembled French artisanal boutiques.⁶ Belgian chocolates retailed for one-half to one-third the price of French artisanal candies and between 1983 and 1990 captured 48 percent of the confectionery gift market (Mathieu 1990). The success of the Belgians touched a raw nerve among French chocolatiers and cultural taste makers.⁷ Belgian firms appropriated the presentational forms of French chocolates (sold in elegant confectionery boutiques), their cultural value to consumers (linked to gifting relations and ceremonial consumption), and specialized French trade terms (used to distinguish among types of candies and to assign evocative names to them).⁸ Mass-produced in Belgium for export, these candies were sold by franchise owners who had no training and little or no contact with the family entrepreneurs of the local craft community.

The French were dismayed by the increasing popularity and market share of candies they judged to be of inferior quality and taste. According to them, Belgian candies are too large (*gros*), too sweet (*sucré*), and too full of fillers (*gras*). They contrast French candies made from pure, dark, bittersweet chocolate with the larger milk and white chocolate products that predominate *chez les Belges* (in Belgian shops). In postindustrial societies such as France, cuisine defines a critically important area where economic power and cultural authority intersect. French cuisine has long enjoyed a preeminent reputation among the cuisines of the world; continuing dominance of the culinary world order is a matter of national pride. Yet in this context what counts as French taste and confectionery savoir faire is not at all clear. As Dorinne Kondo (1992:177) notes for Japanese fashion, "nation" and "culture" are problematized for French artisans when chocolates produced by foreign competitors gain French mar-

ket share. How can one speak of a distinctive French chocolate when the French are just as likely to eat bars made by Mars or Lindt or to offer gifts of bonbons made by Belgian franchises as they are French candies?

Persistent concerns related to chocolate mirrored the tenor of wider debates on the central themes of French national identity. These themes include French competitiveness, economic power, political stature, and, especially, cultural autonomy in new European and world orders.

Demand, Commoditization, and Craft

Recent anthropological analyses move away from a preoccupation with production to privilege exchange and consumption as well as the social life of objects themselves.⁹ Some of these accounts emphasize the nature of commoditization as a process that extends from production through exchange to consumption.¹⁰ Commodities and exchange are defined in ways that mute the reified contrasts between gift and commodity exchange. Nevertheless accounts of both gift and commodity exchange in advanced capitalist contexts usually center on only one type of commodity, mass-produced objects. This scholarship ignores both the existence and commodity status of craft objects as well as their particular suitability for gift exchange in these contexts.

The growing exchange of "traditional" craft commodities in global markets suggests that their purchase and consumption may be an essential feature of the present world economy (Nash 1993). Yet the mechanisms that underlie the demand for and consumption of craft commodities produced in postindustrial centers require further study. Craft commodities acquire and shed culturally specific meanings and symbolic value as they are circulated and consumed. While closely tied to local contexts, the exchange and consumption of craft commodities is also mediated by complex, shifting class and taste distinctions which are in turn shaped by global developments. Few studies address the question of how and to what extent the demand for craft objects is linked to taste-making processes such as rapid fashion shifts, direct political appeals, and the development of late capitalism itself.

If the globalization of markets and transnational consumerism characterize the continuing expansion of industrial capitalism, then this development also engenders a contradictory trend. This trend is manifest in the reassertion of local, culturally constituted identities, places, work practices, and commodities as a source of distinction and authenticity in the face of rapid change and the perceived homogeneity of transnationalism (Harvey 1989). Claims of cultural authenticity in advanced capitalism are often linked to an ideal, aestheticized premodern past as well as the groups, labor forms, and products associated with it.¹¹

Indeed it is the politics of cultural authenticity in the globalization of markets that enables “genuine,” locally produced craft work and commodities to be maintained, revived, and/or reinvented precisely because they can be commoditized and sold as such.

What makes the chocolates sold in French boutiques “authentic” and those retailed in Belgian franchises “inauthentic”? How are these labels linked to changing habits of taste and the status struggles associated with them? In a cultural model of consumption where elite habits are disseminated downward and taste makers have heightened power to manipulate taste, chocolatiers and taste makers collaborated to codify and promote a new set of expert criteria for determining both the quality and the authenticity of “vintage” chocolates (Harvey 1989; Zukin 1991). The French differentiate and validate their chocolates through reference to a definitive taste standard adapted from wine connoisseurs. In the pursuit of social distinction, connoisseurship plays an important role. It drives demand for the prestige goods associated with it by reinforcing their rarity and conferring cultural capital on those who consume them. In this game of newly formulated rules of chocolate connoisseurship, consumers demonstrate that they are worthy of symbolically appropriating the objects they purchase through their mastery and display of esoteric taste protocols (Bourdieu 1984).

Moreover, in advanced capitalist societies where consumers have little if any direct experience with production, which itself is a symbol of alienation, Chaudun’s chocolates are incarnated signs. Unlike mass-produced commodities, they do not require significant cultural work on the part of consumers to be moved symbolically from the realm of the standardized, impersonal commodity into the realm of personalized gift relations (Carrier 1990). Craft commodities do this cultural work for consumers; they make visible both a particular form of production (linking the conception of a product to its execution) and its attendant social relations. They are imbued with and are the bearers of the social identities of their makers and for this reason retain certain inalienable properties (Mauss 1990[1925]; Weiner 1992). Produced in limited quantities, using traditional methods and/or materials, they evoke uninterrupted continuity with the past. The historicities of these goods, even if invented or altered, give them special value for both use and gift exchange. This is what makes them “authentic” and distinguishes them from the “fake” or “inauthentic” chocolate made from identical materials. The silver jewelry made by Navajo Indians, the confections crafted by Japanese artisans, the pottery produced by Onta craftsmen, and the French candies crafted by master chocolatiers all have cultural authenticity in this sense.

If Chaudun’s “art” exemplifies the principles of Veblenian consumption, it also reveals the extravagance and power of the potlatch (cf. Tobin 1992). Craftsmen like

Chaudun spend many hours sculpting and molding pieces of confectionery art commissioned by both individual and corporate clients. Coaxed from the most perishable and delicate of media, chocolate art costing hundreds of dollars must be destroyed in order to be eaten. In some instances these pieces are publicly displayed only to be ceremoniously shattered and then distributed to those present.

The Gentrification of Chocolate Taste

Although Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) exhaustive account of French consumption succeeds in rescuing taste from essentialist doctrines of aesthetics by linking it to culture, his treatment of both culture and taste remains largely arbitrary and static. In the end, objects are constitutive elements of a tight, circular model of social and cultural reproduction which perpetuates established class hierarchies. Not considered is the capacity of objects to play a role in blurring or subverting status continuities rather than merely reinforcing them. Neither is the impact of cultural taste makers on demand and the process of commoditization.

In France, the considerable interest in culinary arts is signified by a huge gastronomic literature, tourist guides, cooking demonstrations, and exhibits. These sources provide consumers with comprehensive rules governing the choice of ingredients, appropriate implements, correct preparation techniques, aesthetic presentation, and the ordering and consumption of different dishes in restaurants. In France as well as other postindustrial economies, rising levels of per capita income and greater disposable income have produced a broader middle class of consumers with the financial means to adopt a “reflexive” attitude toward the consumption of goods in general and food in particular (Zukin 1991). Their search for differentiation and authenticity in the consumption of food is reflected in the growing international demand for gourmet cuisine. It is a cuisine dominated by the latest French culinary trends. In what has been called “the gentrification of taste,” distinctive regional culinary styles and local foodstuffs are rediscovered and marketed by taste makers, restaurateurs, and retailers (Bestor 1992). The aesthetic presentation of locally and regionally produced foodstuffs in new taste combinations appeals to sophisticated urbanites who want food that has both cultural authenticity and cachet. The formulation of a new French standard in chocolate consumption exemplifies the gentrification of taste.

The new standard was organized around the basic principles informing the *nouvelle cuisine* style of cooking that dominated the French culinary establishment in the 1970s. Like *nouvelle cuisine*, this standard emphasized healthful eating habits and dietetic concerns. It also man-

dated fresh, natural ingredients, novel but simplified flavorings, and the production of “good-for-you” dark chocolates made with little sugar. The new standard emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s and was widely disseminated in gastronomic texts destined for the general public, in craft publications compiled for customers, and in newspaper and magazine articles, travel guides, television and radio interviews, public craft events, chocolate tastings, and boutique displays.¹²

According to this standard, only bittersweet chocolate, rated according to the percentage of pure cacao, constitutes a refined commodity as opposed to a sweet milk or white chocolate. The use of the term *cacao* here is significant. In French one word, *cacao*, glosses both the raw material (cacao bean) and the processing phases that yield cocoa and chocolate. The promotion of “les plus grands crus de cacao” thus implies control over the entire production process from cultivation to finished product, while simultaneously lending the authority of the internationally accepted reference standard of French wines to expert judgments of chocolate.

In the new game of chocolate connoisseurship in which taste makers manipulate new fashions, consumers emulate celebrated chocolatiers and Parisian gastronomes. The life history of one chocolatier closely associated with the new standard, Robert Linxe, illustrates the French cultural specificity of this process.

Linxe is an acknowledged master chef, chocolatier, and gastronome. He came from a working-class background and perfected his craft through the traditional means of apprenticeship in several different confectionery houses and long years of hands-on work experience. In 1954 Linxe purchased a Parisian pastry business in decline, building it into a highly successful operation over more than 20 years. Anxious to specialize in chocolate, Linxe sold his first business and in 1977 opened the House of Chocolate in a very fashionable area of Paris, the Faubourg Saint-Honoré.¹³

Linxe’s new business attracted considerable media attention. Because of the importance of seasonal confectionery gift purchases in France and the high sales volume at these times (between 35 and 50 percent of annual sales are generated at Christmas), French chocolatiers are always showcased in special media features during December and before Easter. At a time when most French chocolatiers sold roughly equal numbers of milk and dark chocolate candies, Linxe proposed a house line of specialties which included 23 dark candies and only four milk chocolates. He also subverted and remade traditional work practices in the family artisanal boutique. At a time when most craftsmen remained in the private space of the family workshop, Linxe moved freely between the workshop and the public space of the boutique. He took a highly visible role in both production and sales by personally advising customers on the choice and proper consump-

tion of their chocolates. Linxe took the lead in “reeducating French palates” by offering guided tastings of his candies within his boutique.

Reeducating French Palates

Throughout my fieldwork craftspeople and taste makers explained the success of Belgian franchises by alluding to an overall assault on traditional French taste standards in food. They insisted that this began in the early 1970s with the proliferation of foreign fast-food chains like MacDonald’s, currently the largest restaurant chain in France. They bemoaned the fact that French palates had been deformed (*déformés*) by exposure to the questionable composition of foreign chocolates mass-produced from cheap substitute ingredients. In 1990 an article dealing specifically with the Belgian “invasion” appeared in the national daily *Le Monde* (December 20). Quotes from Parisian craftspeople stressed the need to reeducate French palates and to defend a distinctive French art of chocolate production and taste.

As my fieldwork progressed, it demanded my personal investigation of chocolate taste—as aesthetic judgment, cultural standard, and sentient experience. Paul Stoller (1994) has recently argued that ethnography has long privileged visual metaphors and has, as a result, failed to document the full range of sensory perception or “the savory sauces of ethnographic life.” My personal apprenticeship in taste and understanding of the craft, its practitioners, and the tastes distinguishing “vintage” French chocolates from Belgian “imitations” demanded the education of my own palate. Through guided repetition, my “good taste” in chocolate was habituated and embodied.

Since 1977, Linxe has conducted literally dozens of interviews which have been widely disseminated through national and international media. Linxe agreed to an interview—of which a tasting is an integral part—and after a tour of his flagship Saint-Honoré boutique and workshop, we sat down. Linxe looked at me over his glasses and announced that the best part had arrived—the tasting. I had fully expected and even greatly anticipated a chocolate tasting, yet as I waited for him to get the chocolates, I felt my palms begin to sweat and unruly butterflies begin to flutter in my stomach. The tasting was designed to instill new taste criteria as well as to test my judgment as a discriminating consumer of chocolate. At the time I was well aware of the new taste standard.

During six months of preliminary fieldwork in 1989 I had conducted some informal experiments in which I entered French artisanal boutiques and specifically requested sweet milk chocolates in order to observe the reaction of the salespeople. What shocked me as I sat in Linxe’s boutique was my fear of failing as well as my

eagerness to demonstrate my possession of cultural capital in chocolate consumption. As Linxe returned bearing a silver tray with six chocolate candies (four coated with dark chocolate and two with milk chocolate) and a bottle of cool water, I knew I would never admit to liking sweet milk chocolate.

Before beginning Linxe abruptly asked me, in a tone that only allowed for a positive response, "Vous aimez le chocolat?" Being reassured that I liked chocolate, he described the forthcoming experience as an "apprenticeship in taste allowing those palates which are receptive to learn to discriminate among different kinds of chocolate and to appreciate the best." Just then a saleswoman interrupted us saying that there was an important call for Monsieur. He hesitated, looked at me apologetically, and excused himself, urging me to begin on my own. He promised to question me on my preferences.

When I was left alone staring at the candies my mind went back to a description of his house specialties I had read in *The guide of chocolate eaters*. Linxe had served as technical adviser to an exclusive club of Parisian chocophiles, Le Club des Croqueurs du Chocolat, that published the guide. Created in 1982, the club's founding members included gastronomes Claude Lebey and Sylvie Girard, fashion designer Sonya Rykiel, social historian Jean-Paul Aron, and wine connoisseur Nicolas de Rabaudy. Club members promoted French chocolates by regularly organizing elegant chocolate tasting soirées during which they sampled and rated candies from all over the country. The results were published in *The guide*, which in 1988 was widely available in both specialty and mass-distribution book outlets. In his preface, Claude Lebey outlined the criteria informing the ratings:

We want to make perfectly clear that our taste leads us to favor dark chocolates over milk chocolate and . . . that we generally prefer candies with a high dark chocolate content which corresponds to the current taste standards of chocolate connoisseurs. [1988:5–6]

This preface also included specialized oenological terminology for evaluating quality chocolates. Like wine connoisseurs, consumers were urged to marshal four senses in the quest for fine chocolates. They were advised "to look for a shiny coating, to smell the deep and powerful chocolate bouquet, to feel the creamy texture on the palate and to taste the subtle combination of bitter and sweet notes in the composition" (1988:9).

Reading it for the first time, I had been struck by the inclusion of the newest Belgian franchises. It seemed paradoxical that a guide published to highlight "true," grand cru (French) chocolates should even include "cheap" foreign imitations. However, Belgian candies served as a perfect foil to the highly rated candies produced by French masters and received the poorest ratings.

It is obvious that a certain public exists for these attractive sweets which do not have much in common with the powerful subtleties of the Aztec cacao bean. In fact, one should really think of a name other than chocolate for these candies. [1988:152]

As I sat facing the row of tiny, ten-gram candies, I remembered that Linxe was the only chocolatier to receive a rating of 19 out of 20. I tried without success to recall the descriptions his house specialties received in that review. I took several deep breaths and began slowly to sample the candies, mindful of Linxe's parting counsel to "allow the chocolate to melt slowly so that my palate could fully absorb it." I had begun with the dark chocolate bonbons and had only tasted two when Linxe returned. He immediately took charge, briefly describing the basic ingredients and principal flavorings of the candies before I tasted them. "This chocolate is a superb bittersweet *ganache*, a creamy dark chocolate center made with the freshest cream, butter, and finely ground morsels of pure, dark chocolate and then coated in dark chocolate. The center is delicately flavored with lemon. It's sublime . . . very long on the palate." After we had finished, the analysis began. Which candy did I prefer? Could I say why?

I chose the first dark chocolate I had tasted, a ganache with a bittersweet dark center and dark chocolate coating, in part because it had left the most distinct gustatory impression. To my delight, and profound relief, Linxe emitted an appreciative "ah" saying, "Madame, I congratulate you on your excellent taste. The candy you chose is one of the most famous of my house specialties, the Quito." He added, "Someone who knows how to judge good wine is also able to judge a good chocolate . . . a good chocolate is long on the palate, full-bodied, has the correct degree of acidity, a rich, balanced bouquet, and a wonderful finish."

This oenological encounter powerfully illustrates how taste is produced and reproduced. The point is not that I was nervous in the company of native experts or that I finally acquired good taste in chocolate. Rather, it is to show how consumers, even foreign anthropologists acutely aware of the processes at work, can be drawn into mastering, displaying, and ultimately, replicating taste protocols. It also reveals the interplay of culture and power. If North Americans who hold dominant class positions see themselves as culturally invisible (Rosaldo 1989:202–204), in France the reverse holds true. The culture that members of the dominant bourgeois class see themselves as exemplifying is the source and sign of their power. It is their cultured practices that separate them from the uncultured, even "barbarous" habits of lower classes (Bourdieu 1984). At the same time, the popularization of an elite standard means that it will not remain the unique preserve of the dominant classes. All consumers who internalize and reinforce the standard by buying and giving the right chocolates to family and friends can

achieve some measure of social distinction. By virtue of their good taste they become more cultured and more French.

And what is the impact of the ethnographer? My documentation of this standard may have the unintended outcome of both validating it and hastening mass consumption of prestige candies. It may also unwittingly serve the interests of Parisian craft leaders who, involved in difficult, ongoing negotiations with bureaucrats in Paris and Brussels over issues ranging from training to new norms of chocolate production and labeling, sent me an urgent request for a copy of my dissertation in September 1994. This example also underscores the complexity of doing fieldwork in sites where the people we study not only read but selectively appropriate and disseminate portions of what we write for validation of their own strategic ends.

Authentic Taste and Artisanal Savoir Faire

Their access to public media allows famous masters to play an important role in defining and celebrating the special skills that distinguish them as craftsmen from industrial producers. This differentiation has involved adroitly manipulating the knowledge of the transformations that a commodity like chocolate undergoes between cultivation and consumption. Knowledge about both the production and consumption of commodities has "technical, mythological and evaluative components and . . . [is] susceptible to mutual and dialectical interaction" especially as the complexity and distance of their flows increases (Appadurai 1986:41). As noted above, French artisans no longer select, blend, and process cacao beans. All purchase industrially produced blocks of chocolate. Yet few French consumers know this, and Parisian chocolatiers like Linxe and Chaudun make creative use of an oenological model, which gives the impression that their knowledge of and involvement in the productive process extends from the choice of the best vintages of beans to their transformation and presentation in the family boutique. Craftsmen on the local level have enthusiastically followed this lead.

As Linxe explained in a 1989 radio interview, "there are different types of cacao beans each from a different place, each with a climate and soil which endows it with particular properties" (*Champs-Élysées*, série 8, numéro 5). In asserting their skill as expert "alchemists," chocolatiers invoke a system for blending cacao beans that closely parallels that of the highest quality officially classified growths or estates (*les grands crus*) in the Bordeaux winegrowing region. While no such classification or regulation of cacao bean plantations exists, French chocolatiers nevertheless assure consumers that they select only

the best vintages from renowned domains in South America.¹⁴

They also remind consumers that industrially produced candies are "mummified" with preservatives and lack the "purity" and originality of handcrafted candies. The authenticity of their candies is linked to traditional methods passed down intergenerationally from father to son which privilege manual versus mechanized production and guarantee goods freshly made on the premises.

In postindustrial societies like France, craft can serve as a metaphor for an alternative set of cultural values and work practices in contrast to the dominant norm.¹⁵ In these settings the persistence, reinvention, or creation of traditional craft cultural forms, work practices, and communities can be a means to reassert cultural distinctiveness and identity in response to rapidly changing circumstances (Harvey 1989). Master craftsmen can be celebrated as symbols of local and/or national cultural values. Craft commodities can be marketed on the basis of the nostalgia for an aestheticized, preindustrial work ethos. Here tradition serves as a model of the past that changes constantly because it is continually reinvented and reconstructed from the vantage point of the present. Indeed, the uses of the past outlined in the next section reveal it to be a social construction strongly mediated and shaped by persistent contemporary concerns.¹⁶

Stimulating Chocolate Consumption: The Uses of the Past

Culturally constructed stories or mythologies about commodity flows acquire particular intensity as the spatial, cognitive, and institutional distances between production and consumption increase (Appadurai 1986:48). This intensity is reflected in the recently constructed mythology surrounding chocolate as an exotic New World substance. This mythology aimed to alter the symbolic associations and culturally constituted uses of chocolate as a device to stimulate consumption. In the early 1980s chocolate began to be marketed as a food that appealed to the childlike hedonist within the consumer. It was promoted as a healthy and irresistible food to be eaten spontaneously whenever the urge arose. Currently many chocolatiers display and refer customers to a recent publication by a French doctor entitled *The Therapeutic Virtues of Chocolate* (Robert 1990) which debunks all the persistent "myths" regarding chocolate's deleterious side effects.

The French make an astute use of the past and play on an enduring fascination with the exoticism of the inhabitants, customs, and cuisines of the New World and the Orient. Drawing selectively on historical accounts left by European explorers and missionaries, French chocolatiers and taste makers have recreated an exoticized

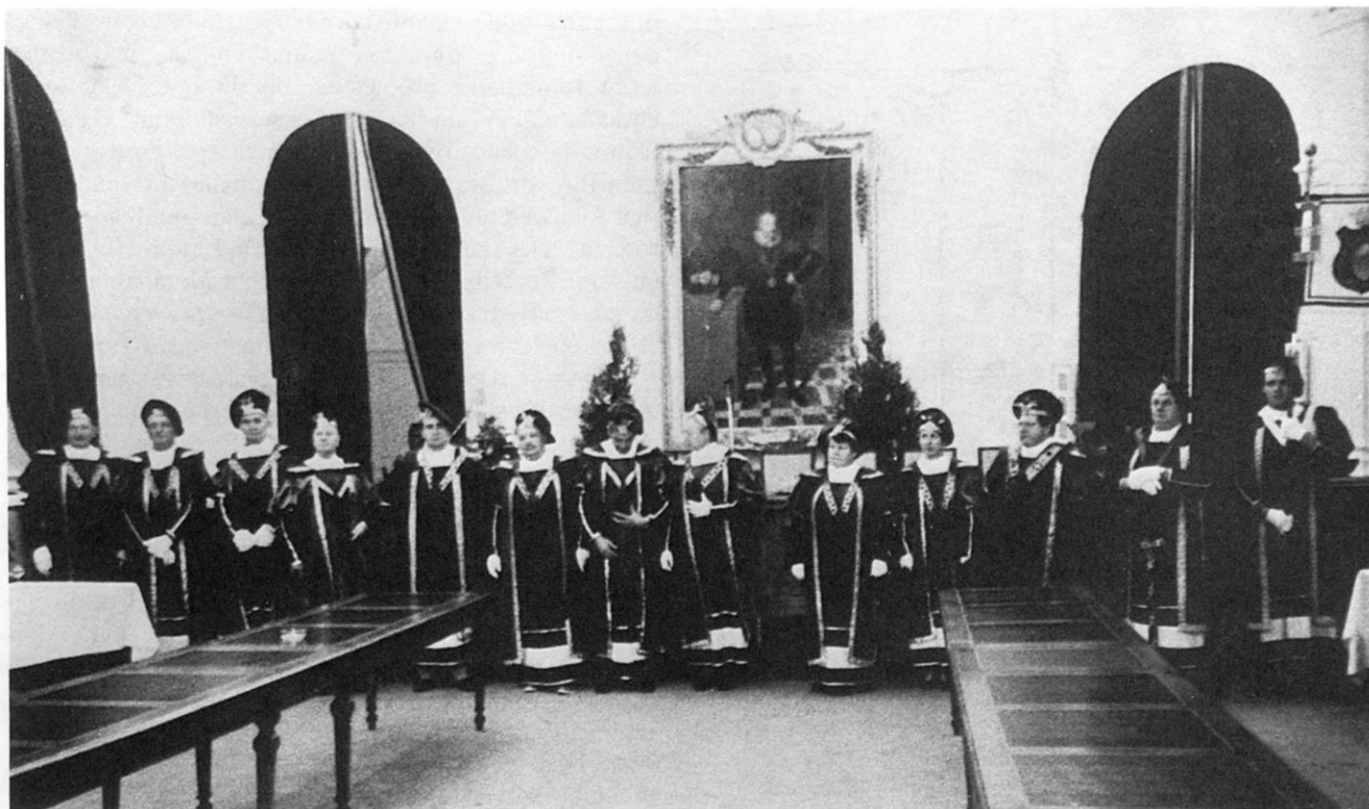


Figure 4

Induction ceremony, Brotherhood of French Chocolatiers, Pau, France, 1991. Photo by Susan J. Terrio.

history of the discovery, production, and consumption of chocolate in the New World. This reinvented history both celebrates and replicates a number of primitivist tropes. It involves a timeless, exotic story set in a dangerous land dominated by primal impulses, bizarre customs, and ludic excess (Said 1978). This history centers on the “primitive” methods, “strange” spices (such as hot pepper), and “curious” uses of chocolate in the New World as well as on its introduction and reception into European court society. It highlights the process whereby the unruly substance that served as a bitter, spicy drink to Aztec nobles at Montezuma’s court was “domesticated” and made appetizing to the delicate “civilized” palates of European aristocratic elites, particularly women. While chocolatiers celebrate the transformation from raw to cooked they also promote chocolate as a substance that fuses nature and culture. Superior-tasting chocolate is bittersweet, both exotic and refined. Although linked to a new standard of refinement, quality French chocolate leads true aficionados to abandon cultural convention in favor of hedonistic indulgence.

In most representations of chocolate there are consistently recurrent elements. These include indigenous legends and rituals related to chocolate use during the time of the Aztecs. The most popular is the Indian origin myth, which describes the divine provenance of cacao

trees in the Garden of Eden and their transportation to mortal men by the Indians’ plumed serpent god Quetzalcoatl. In some accounts this myth is inevitably accompanied by a recounting of the worship of Quetzalcoatl in elaborate Aztec fertility rites marked by “violent orgies” (Constant 1988; Robert 1990).

Aztec imagery figures prominently in the symbols and rituals adopted by a number of contemporary craft associations. One such organization, *La Confrérie des Chocolatiers Français*, stages elaborate public induction ceremonies in which Brotherhood elders don brown velvet robes and a headdress with an effigy of Quetzalcoatl, who is described as “the Aztec god of chocolate” (see Figure 4).

Another recurrent theme highlights the primitive production methods used by the Aztecs. Virtually all of the chocolate gastronomic texts published in the 1980s feature the same image of an American primitive with chocolate tools (see Figure 5) which appeared in a 17th-century scholarly work centering on the three substances new to Europe: coffee, tea, and chocolate (Dufour 1685). Selective portions of this text are quoted to provide testimony to the contrast between a crudely processed, spicy American drink and the sweet, refined beverage perfected by Europeans.



Figure 5

American with chocolate pot and stirrer. Photo courtesy of the Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress.

At the same time, French representations of chocolate consumption by Aztec nobles at Montezuma's court recall visions of ritualistic excess and the agonistic expenditure associated with the potlatch (Bataille 1985; Baudrillard 1981). In these treatments chocolate is a food of erotic temptation, both irresistible and dangerous—irresistible because of its divine taste and the aphrodisiac properties attributed to it by both Aztec and European aristocratic elites. Many accounts relate selected portions of the eyewitness account of Montezuma II's court provided by a member of Cortez's entourage (Diaz del Castillo 1803[1572]). At a local craft-sponsored conference on the history of chocolate in the New World attended by 250 people in the southwest city of Pau in February 1991, one

of the featured speakers gave his version of conspicuous consumption at the Aztec court: "I must tell you that Montezuma had a prodigious appetite and capacity for chocolate. It is said that he was served about 50 cups of frothy chocolate in golden cups which were used once and then thrown away." In the question-and-answer period that followed he was asked if chocolate really is an aphrodisiac. His reply: "Well, I'll respond indirectly to that question by telling the audience that Montezuma is reputed to have had 100 wives and he was served chocolate before each visit to the harem in order to be in good form."

In these representations chocolate is also dangerous because of its addictive properties. French accounts of chocolate consumption glorify the breakdown of willpower and playfully hint at the bizarre excesses to which an acquired habit for fine chocolate can lead, especially if it is thwarted. A number of gastronomic accounts relate the unsuccessful attempt of a Catholic bishop in colonial Mexico to stop what he considered to be the blasphemous practice of Spanish noblewomen so attached to their chocolate that they had it served to them during morning mass.¹⁷ The bishop forbade the taking of chocolate in church on pain of excommunication. Soon after, he became ill and died after drinking poisoned chocolate served him by one of his disgruntled parishioners.

Examples of prodigious consumption of chocolate among aristocrats in the past are interspersed with those of contemporary social elites.¹⁸ The fashion designer Sonya Rykiel has frequently spoken of her chocoholism in published interviews. When I interviewed her in 1989 she claimed to be "pursued" by chocolate and described it as "a drug and a mystery you shouldn't try too hard to solve." Dark, evocatively named chocolates like "Montezuma," "Caracas," and "Aztec" evoke and invite new consuming passions; they suggest self-pleasuring, playful indulgence, and conspicuous leisure. French consumers are invited to join in the play and to follow the lead of accomplished masters and taste makers in sophisticated urban centers who indulge their taste for grand cru chocolates.

Conclusion

The recent conjuncture of the rise of a broader middle-class group of French consumers with the means to purchase expensive, handcrafted chocolates as gifts and for their own consumption, on the one hand, and the appearance of foreign franchises selling mass-produced candies in settings that replicate French artisanal boutiques, on the other, is a unique one in the history of the craft. The swift proliferation of these franchises changed the terms of the dialogue between French consumers and artisanal producers. The issue of exclusivity that had

informed this dialogue in the past, when chocolate was a rare and costly luxury reserved for elite consumption, gave way to the issue of authenticity (Appadurai 1986:44). Authenticity in this context is determined by culturally elaborated judgments involving connoisseurship, taste, and correctness.

In contemporary postindustrial economies like that of France, discriminating consumers want distinctive goods that are both culturally genuine and esoteric. Yet in these settings the only way to preserve or recreate the elite resonance of commodities that can be mass-produced is to elaborate the criteria of authenticity surrounding them. Through this elaboration and dissemination of an esoteric taste standard, French chocolatiers and cultural taste makers have differentiated authentic French chocolates handcrafted in French workshops by master craftsmen from foreign imitations. As *bricoleurs* they adapted a number of relevant elements of French culture in order to transform traditional craft candies into dessert cuisine with enhanced value and cachet for both individual consumption and gift exchange. Informing the cultural authenticity of these commodities are oenological criteria of connoisseurship in taste, a culinary discourse of freshness, purity, and aesthetics, and a French heritage of skilled craftsmanship and family entrepreneurship.

The craft commodities displayed in French boutiques like Chaudun's draw their power and value from their symbolic loading. Both craft and cuisine are potent, manipulable symbols of French culture on which numerous ideas can be projected and validated. In postindustrial economies marked by the "production of volatility" (Harvey 1989) handcrafted commodities satisfy the nostalgia for and appeal of the localized goods and modes of production associated with a traditional past. Chaudun's chocolates are both locally produced and distinctly French. The very persistence of skilled craftsmen and family modes of entrepreneurship in these economies means they can be absorbed within and designated as unique manifestations of a unified national culture. They can be enshrined as part of the nation's historic patrimony and redefined as genuine, living cultural forms.

The reconception of French chocolates as culturally genuine food occurred amid the uncertainty generated by the impending unification of the European community. Attempts to forge Europeanness in the name of a universal culture were especially problematic given the existence of a notion of French culture also defined as universal and embodied in French cultural achievements from literature to cuisine. Belgian candies, marketed as if they were freshly made, locally crafted French goods, were particularly threatening because they represented an incursion into sensitive cultural terrain. The proposed implementation of European production norms for chocolate only heightened fears of increased cultural homogeneity in the name of Europe. The promotion of signature candy reci-

pes and confectionery art were a reassertion of French cultural integrity as it is manifest in the culinary arts, master craftsmanship, and aesthetic standards.

The selective appropriation, reinvention, and exoticization of the historical origin and uses of chocolate in the New World also serve this purpose. By constructing a specifically French history of chocolate and celebrating its transformation from a primitive, foreign foodstuff to a refined French one, chocolatiers and connoisseurs reinforce received notions concerning French taste even as these notions are used to promote new confectionery criteria for determining it. In the skilled hands of French craftsmen, chocolate is sweetened but retains the powerful taste of its wild, natural origins. It is domesticated yet remains inextricably linked to the consuming habits of elites redefined as both cultured and hedonistic.

Preliminary French studies of confectionery consumption patterns (Casella 1989; Mathieu 1990) as well as surveys I conducted among producers and consumers during 1990–91 revealed that French consumers embraced the new standard by routinely specifying dark, semisweet chocolates in both personal and gift purchases. It remains to be seen if they will continue to indulge, even satiate, their appetite for the chocolates of masters like Linxe and Chaudun whose art, according to *The guide*, fully reveals the "powerful subtleties of the Aztec cacao bean" (1988).

Notes

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1. Author's translation: This is a boutique where chocolate is master, crafted by a master. It is 100 percent artisanal work in the artistic sense of the term, which excels in drawing out the full-bodied splendor of the sublime American [cacao] bean.

2. Here *taste maker* refers to food critics, chefs, restaurateurs, journalists, social and artistic elites, and intellectuals such as social historians with access to visual and print media in France and the power to shape taste.

3. Some important works on consumption in advanced capitalist contexts include Appadurai 1986; Baudrillard 1981; Bourdieu 1984; Harvey 1989; Jameson 1984; Miller 1987; Sahlins 1976; Tobin 1992; and Zukin 1991. See Nash 1993 for an analysis of craft goods in the world market.

4. Historically France has been a preeminent nation of small manufacture, skilled artisanship, and craft associations such as guilds. France's reputation in luxury craft production was established through the worldwide export of French perfume, fashion, porcelain, sculpted furniture, wine, and cuisine. French

artisanship also enjoys a positive resonance because small-scale, skill-based modes of family entrepreneurship dominated trade and industry well into the 20th century.

5. Attempts to depict the size of the French artisanal chocolate industry result in different statistics. The number of French businesses specializing in chocolate production and employing fewer than ten employees totals 720. If one considers small and medium-sized businesses (up to 50 employees), this number increases to 3,500 (Mathieu 1990).

6. It is important to distinguish among the Belgian franchises in question. These do not include the Godiva chocolate franchises firmly implanted in the French market. The new Belgian firms include Léonidas, Daskalidès, Jeff de Bruges, and Neuville.

7. Although there was wide agreement for action among chocolatiers throughout France, Parisians were the first to act for several reasons. First, Paris has historically been and continues to be the most important chocolate center by virtue of its power as a dominant culinary center and because of the amount of chocolate produced annually there. In 1990, 149,306 tons were produced there, while the second most important regional area produced 95,085 tons. Also, Belgian franchises opened first there and maintained a large presence. For example, of the 100 Léonidas franchises in France in 1990, almost one-quarter were located in Paris (Casella 1989).

8. French craftspeople give individual names to each of the house candies they create and produce. These names remain constant over the life of the candy. Recall Chaudun's Esmeralda above.

9. See Appadurai 1986; Baudrillard 1981; Douglas and Isherwood 1981; Miller 1987; Sahlin 1976; and Tobin 1992.

10. See Appadurai 1986; Bestor 1992; and Kopytoff 1986.

11. See Badone 1991; Bestor 1992; Moeran 1984; and Tobin 1992.

12. A partial list of this new chocolate literature includes *The guide of chocolate eaters* 1988; Constant 1988; Girard 1984; and Robert 1990.

13. The trajectories of famous craftsmen like Robert Linxe and nouvelle cuisine chefs Michel Guérard and Paul Bocuse suggest a radical reconfiguration of the French culinary landscape beginning in the 1970s (Zukin 1991:208–210). This new landscape is tied to the worldwide expansion of gourmet cuisine as a new form of cultural consumption. In less than a decade, Linxe built an international reputation by creating a small chain of exclusive chocolate boutiques in Paris, Tokyo, and New York.

14. Yet French industrial producers of chocolate have continued to use predominantly West African beans cultivated on plantations in their former colonies, blending these with smaller proportions of the rarer South American beans. The complete omission of Africa in the story of French chocolate effectively elides a problematic colonial past and in so doing reenacts the very dynamics of colonialism.

15. See Ennew 1982; Harevan 1992; Kondo 1990; and Moeran 1984.

16. A large body of anthropological and historical scholarship centers on the invention of tradition and the politics of memory; see Connerton 1989; Halbwachs 1968; Handler and Linnekin 1984; and Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983. In France the field of memory has received the most systematic attention from historians—both “new history” *Annales* historians (Nora 1993) and those whose work examines the World War II Vichy period

(Rouso 1990). Rouso's analysis of the tension between a “voluntarist” memory which commemorates and an “implicit” memory which elides is useful here. Memory omissions reveal much about the symbolic construction of nation, craft, and commodity.

17. This incident was reported in a virtually identical manner in the gastronomic texts listed above. It is taken from Thomas Gage, English chronicler of Mesoamerican Indian life in the colonial period (1958[1648]:143–145).

18. See the correspondence of the well-known chronicler of 17th-century French court life, Madame de Sévigné.

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