

# Savor

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## Sweet story

For the love of chocolate, historian devotes her life to 'food of the rich'

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FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

**C**hocolate as a symbol of love and affection has been intimately tied to Valentine's Day for as long as, well, does anybody really know?

"The Spaniards are guilty!" exclaimed Maricel E. Presilla with the glee of a student confident in her answer.

Presilla, who holds a doctorate in medieval history, talks about chocolate and the cacao beans from which it's made with an enthusiasm and depth of knowledge as rich as the courtesies she cherishes. In their chronicles, she explained, the conquistadors described the Aztec leader Montezuma as consuming copious amounts of a chocolate drink taken from a golden cup so he would have enough energy for his women. "Even in pre-Columbian times it was the food of the rich. When the Spaniards embraced it, the food already had a prestige," continued Presilla. The subsequent addition of other costly ingredients, such as sugar and exotic spices "added value to an already valuable commodity. They thought of it as a precious thing, and you give precious things to people you love."

Though consumers typically say they favor one brand of chocolate over another, most self-professed chocoholics don't know beans about cacao, believes Presilla. And she's on a mission to change that. The head of Gran Cacao, a cacao bean importing firm, and executive chef and co-owner of Zafra, a small restaurant in Hoboken specializing in Latin American cuisine, she has written "The New Taste of Chocolate: A Cultural & Natural History of Cacao with Recipes" (Ten Speed Press, 2001). In it she uses her experience as a historian, researcher and teacher to explain, as she notes in the book, that "Not all chocolates are born equal, and not all cacaos deserved to be processed into chocolate."

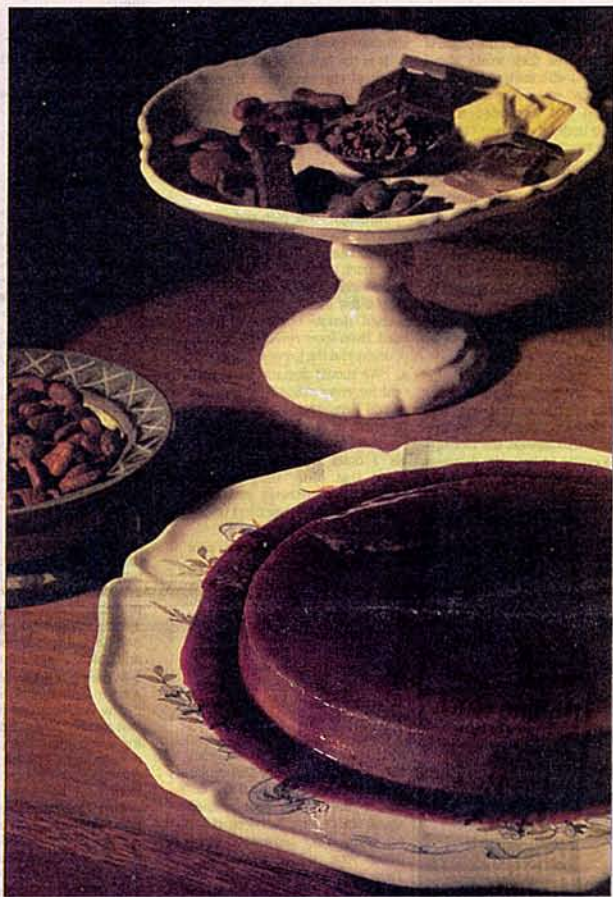
In the sunny yellow dining room of her Weehawken home — where sculptures of cacao pods decorate the table, antique European chocolate pots sit atop a sideboard, and three brilliantly colored tropical birds compete for attention with a noisy chow named Namuk and a quieter mutt named Dulce — Presilla painstakingly explains the individual characteristics of the multitude of cacao beans that she now grades as readily as she once graded her students' papers.

"Chocolate should belong to the category of foods where you really care about origin. It's not just snobbery. If you know more about the origin of the beans, if you know more about the intrinsic flavor of cacao, you can understand quality," she said.

To savor chocolate is to taste the tropics, for cacao trees can grow only in lands 20 degrees north or south of the equator. The main production areas are South and Central America, Africa and Indonesia. Africa's Ivory Coast is the largest producer; Venezuela and Trinidad grow the most flavorful beans.

Basically, explained Presilla, there are three types of domesticated cacao: criollo, which is believed to have originated in Venezuela and continues to grow there, as well as in Chiapas, Mexico; trinitario, which takes its name from the Caribbean island of Trinidad; and forastero, which means "foreigner" in Spanish. "Criollos and trinitarios are better than forasteros from the standpoint of flavor and aroma; there's more complexity," she said. "The forastero bean, for the most part, is quite bitter, acidic, astringent." Grown primarily in Africa and Indonesia, forasteros masked with sugar are often used to bulk up lesser-quality chocolates, but may be included in the blends of good-quality ones as well.

"Good chocolate can be made from a combination of sev-



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Chocolate informs much of Maricel Presilla's life, especially the dessert table: creamy chocolate cheese flan with hibiscus caramel and a chocolate sampler with cacao beans and nibs. Presilla, (below) in her Weehawken home.

