

## CHOCOLATE

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### A precious gift for people you love

forastero cacao from Ghana, with enough trinitarios or criollos added until the blender reaches the desired "plateau of flavor," she explained.

A native of Santiago, Cuba, Presilla began her love affair with chocolate at an early age. As a child she relished the refreshing lychee-like flavor of the gelatinous ivory pulp of the football-size cacao pods, which grew on a relative's farm. Her route to chocolate connoisseurship, however, was circuitous. She left Cuba for Miami with her father, a painter and art teacher, her mother, a professor of literature, and her two brothers in 1970.

"I came on one of the last 'freedom flights,' we arrived with the clothes on our back," she recalled. Shortly thereafter, she enrolled in Miami-Dade Junior College, and went on to Florida International University. When her husband, Alejandro Presilla (who had escaped Cuba by swimming across Guantanamo Bay), decided to study medicine in Spain, she enrolled in the medieval history program at the University of Valladolid. When they returned to the United States, she earned her master's degree and a Ph.D. from New York University, where she went on to teach medieval history. He became a cardiologist.

While at NYU, Presilla helped organize events for Catalan Week, which included dinners for Ed Koch, mayor of New York at the time, and the mayor of Barcelona. That led to a part-time job at The Ballroom, a trend-setting restaurant specializing in Spanish and Latin American cooking. "I went there because I wanted to escape from the word processor and reach out for the food processor! But I was already thinking of doing more with food as a projection of history," said Presilla. "I found myself getting to know a lot of people who were very influential in food at The Ballroom. I met Paula Wolfert, and Paula is really responsible for getting me into this mess," she said with a laugh.

Wolfert recommended that a reporter writing an article on Latin American tubers interview Presilla. After the article appeared, "companies starting calling me out of the blue for advice because Latin foods



Maricel Presilla's sampler with cacao beans and cacao nibs: tempting treats from the hands of an expert.

were starting to take off," recalled Presilla, who took on consulting assignments with Campbell's and Victor's Café in Manhattan while teaching. "I had a split personality," she recalled. "I would be teaching, and I would be going to conferences on food."

Always in the back of her mind was the desire to write a Latin American cookbook. A "great contract" from the editor of "The Joy of Cooking" steered her resolve: She abandoned the classroom for some extended research.

While in Venezuela, she met the head of the El Rey chocolate company, who eventually hired her to market his company's products in the United States. "To do the marketing work, I really had to understand what I was saying," recalled Presilla. She immersed herself in her research and created a "cacao route" on which to take high-profile journalists and chefs. Her goal was to help them trace the origin of the chocolates they wrote about and cooked with back to the cacao plantations, where the beans are harvested and fermented in the open air under a covering of plantain leaves, before being roasted and ground by the processors. "The True Taste of Chocolate" was a natural outgrowth of her assiduous field work.

Although the discovery of potent antioxidants in chocolate has led to sensational headlines proclaiming that "chocolate is good for you," Presilla purposefully sidestepped that issue in her book. "I shy away from the headlines, and I re-

ally would like to see more research," she said. "Anything that is positive about chocolate is great news for me and for everybody that loves chocolate. But also, you have to weigh that against the fact that for chocolate to be really delicious, it has to have sugar. It's still a candy. And if you have a 50 percent cacao content chocolate, there's still 50 percent which is sugar. The cacao content has a high percentage of fat, which can be from 50 to 60 percent, so a lot of calories in chocolate come from fat."

It is the lack of detail in the labeling of chocolate that concerns Presilla more. Commonly used terms such as "milk chocolate," "dark milk," "semisweet" and "bittersweet" are meaningless, she contends, for they don't explain the ratio of cacao to the other ingredients.

Although some high-end chocolates do denote their cacao content by percentage, "that just tells you how much cacao, not what kind of beans were used," said Presilla. Only a few manufacturers, she explained, denote the type of beans used. Even fewer reveal the country of origin and the grower.

"We should demand cacao content for every single chocolate. We should demand exact provenance. In order to give cheap chocolate, you have to buy cheap raw materials. I don't think people understand that. They understand it with other ingredients and other commodities, but they don't understand it with chocolate."

"A good chocolate stays in your mouth for a long time," she explained. "A good chocolate is complex. It has all kinds of nuances, great aroma. A good chocolate would have perfume. Flat is bad, flat is boring. An excellent chocolate should be complex, it should fill your mouth with different sensations. It's what makes it exciting, what makes it great."

Switching gears from cacao connoisseur and chef to historian, she noted, "In pre-Columbian times, people cared about the origin of the beans, people knew about the synergy between different beans. They understood which beans were better than others. They knew what adulteration was all about. They understood all cacaoes were not made equal, that there were differences in flavor and quality. It took a long time for people to lose the connection. As chocolate became mass-produced, we lost touch with the raw material."

Although cacao remains a central part of her life, the raw material she is most preoccupied with these days is the manuscript of her "Classic Foods of Latin America" cookbook, which was placed on the back burner in favor of chocolate, and which she hopes will be published later this year. And then, of course, there are the chocolate moles, and vanilla and chocolate savories she's overseeing to mark Valentine's Day at Zafra.

Still running between the processor and the food proc the historian laughs, "I have plans to do anything on Valen Day, except for work." But it is obvious that she plans to love minute of it.

### Creamy Chocolate Cheese Flan with Hibiscus Caramel

— From: "The New Taste of Chocolate: A Cultural & Natural History of Cacao with Recipes" by Maricel E. Presilla (Ten Speed Press, 2012) 12 servings

For the hibiscus caramel:  
1 ounce (about ¾ cup) dried hibiscus blossoms (Jamaica flowers)  
2 cups water  
1 cup sugar

For the flan:  
4½ cups milk  
1 (14-ounce) can condensed milk  
¼ cup dark aged rum  
6 star anise pods  
2 (3-inch) sticks soft Ceylon cinnamon (sold as canela in Hispanic markets)  
1 teaspoon anise seeds  
1 teaspoon vanilla extract, preferably Mexican  
1 teaspoon bitter almond extract

2 plump Mexican vanilla beans, split lengthwise, seeds scraped and reserved  
Pinch of freshly grated nutmeg  
½ teaspoon salt  
6 ounces (70 per cent cacao) dark chocolate, finely chopped  
6 ounces cream cheese, at room temperature  
6 egg yolks  
2 whole eggs

1. To make the caramel, set aside a 10-by-2-inch round cake pan or 12 4-ounce ramekins. Place the hibiscus blossoms in a small pan with the water and bring to a boil over medium heat. Reduce the heat to low and simmer, stirring occasionally, until the calyces are softened and the water is a brilliant ruby red, about 10 minutes. Strain through a fine-mesh sieve into a second small saucepan, pressing with a spoon to extract as much liquid as possible. You will have about 1½ cups hibiscus infusion.

2. Add the sugar to the infusion and cook over medium heat, watching carefully for about 12 to 14 minutes, until the mixture thickens to look like a syrup, bubbles quickly and turns a light mahogany color.

3. Working quickly, place a small bowl of cold water by the stove and begin to test by drizzling a drop of the syrup into it every minute or so. For the first 6 minutes, the drops will form a soft ball when pressed between the thumb and forefinger; the sugar is done when the drop forms hard brittle threads. The color will be a deep, rich, reddish mahogany.

4. Quickly pour the hot caramel into the cake pan or ramekins and swirl to

coat the bottom and sides; evenly before the mixture hardens. Set aside the pan or ramekins and let cool while you make the flan.

5. Combine the milk and condensed milk in a saucepan. Add the rum, star anise, cinnamon sticks, anise seeds, vanilla and almond extracts, vanilla beans, nutmeg and salt. Bring barely to boil, reduce the heat to low, and simmer gently for 2 to 3 minutes.

6. Add the chocolate, stirring with a wooden spoon to help it melt and blend. Don't worry if you see little unmelted clumps dotting the surface. Remove from the heat and let mixture cool to room temperature. When the mixture is cool, remove the vanilla bean, cinnamon sticks and star anise with a fork or slotted spoon.

7. Meanwhile, preheat the oven to 335 degrees. Set up a hot water bath by having ready a kettle of boiling water and a baking dish large enough to hold the cake pan or ramekins.

8. With a wooden spoon, beat the cream cheese in a large mixing bowl until softened. Beat in the yolks and eggs one at a time, using a whisk or electric mixer. Slowly add the cooled chocolate mixture, whisking to blend completely.

9. Strain the mixture through a medium-mesh strainer directly into the cake pan or ramekins coated with caramel. Place the pan or ramekins in the larger baking dish, slide into the oven, and carefully pour in enough hot water to come halfway up the outside of the cake pan or ramekins.

10. Bake for about 1 hour (30 to 40 minutes for the ramekins). Don't expect the custard to be completely set in the center. Remove from the oven, lift from the water bath and let cool to room temperature. Refrigerate in the pan for at least 3 hours before turning the flan out onto a platter or individual dishes.

**Nutrition Information**  
Per 7½-ounce serving:  
370 calories; 180 calories from fat; 11g protein; 38g carbs; 37g sugar; 20g total fat; 11g saturated fat; 185mg cholesterol; 1g dietary fiber; 180mg sodium; 25% Daily Values calcium; 6% Daily Values iron.