

Harris from Paris

The World Capital of Chocolate

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Summary: Complete coverage of the annual chocolate festival where free samples are given out by world class chocolatiers

Bayonne, France - Where is the marching band? On the last weekend of May, Bayonne hosts a festival called 'Chocolate Days.' I expect to see throngs of crowds, bunches of balloons and big parades. But there are no throngs, no balloons and no parade.

I am so disappointed that I enter what appears to be a coffee house but is actually a chocolate shop. Named Cazenave, which sounds more Spanish than French, it's been here since 1890.

Inside, rows of delicate, beautiful, sensual chocolates are laid out along a refined counter. The shop lady eyes me as if doubting that I could appreciate the high quality here. Being in a chocolate shop in Bayonne is like being in a jewelry shop anywhere else.

The tourist office may be promoting a chocolate festival and the locals may have agreed to tolerate the masses and curiosity seekers, but remember, we are still in France where God was born, cuisine is King and the shop owner, not the customer, is always right.

The lady at the counter advises against a coffee and for a hot chocolate. She allows me to purchase a delicate chocolate bar lovingly wrapped in bright colorful tissue.

I take a bite and the flavor explodes to the farthest corners of my head. This is fantastic chocolate! Silky and smooth, sweet and creamy. Not at all milky or sugary.

My hot chocolate is served in a pastel flower decorated porcelain cup and saucer with a dollop of real whipped cream on the side. The froth does not merely peak over the hot liquid, it bubbles up way over the cup and doesn't dare spill. It looks like a child's bubble bath in a tea cup. Suddenly I feel like the richest man in the world enjoying the luxury of a Bayonne hot chocolate. Madam Bimboire, the proprietor, nods approvingly.

As I am inside basking in my discovery, outside, an artisan begins sculpting an entire cityscape made of, you guessed it, chocolate. He works quietly and methodically. On occasion a passerby stops to watch. On occasion, he glances up and smiles.

One by one, other artisans and vendors quietly set up unpretentious little stands and get to work.

One man dips chocolate *ganache* into a big bowl of heated chocolate then lays them out to dry. A crowd edges forward waiting to be offered samples. They are.

Outside the shop, Raux Chocolatier, owner and chef, Lionel Raux, under 30 and wearing a white chefs outfit, is dipping strawberries into chocolate and offering them to passersby like he is a grandpa bestowing gifts on grandchildren.

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Forget the balloons, marching band and throngs of masses. Go for the chocolate. Bayonne has been a chocolate center for centuries. It is an integral part of chocolate history.

The cocoa bean is native to Central and South America and was first brought to Europe via Spain by Hernando Cortez in the 1500s. Jewish artisans developed the bean into chocolate where it became a local specialty enjoyed by Spanish royalty.

During the Spanish Inquisition, the artisans Jewish immigrants fled from Spain to Portugal with their lives. And their knowledge of making chocolate.

A century or two later, many found their way to France, particularly Bayonne-St. Esprit where they were forced to live in a ghetto across the river from the city.

The leaders of Bayonne high society considered chocolate making a lowly craft and so chocolate was banned. However, the regions' reputation reached connoisseurs across the continent. Those who wanted 'evil' chocolate, simply had to cross the bridge over the river to score a hit.

After the French Revolution in 1789, full citizenship was granted to people of all religions. Jews moved into town and Bayonne has been famous for chocolate ever since.

Today, there is an Academie du Chocolat de Bayonne and the city boasts a number of world ranked chocolatiers.

Valerie et Christophe Puyodebat have their own shop and have built a museum in the basement. They are experimenting with orange and fruits that looks like abstract art on waves of thin chocolate.

Down the street, world-ranked patissier Thierry Bamas hugs his daughter and gently pulls her away from the samples of chocolate reserved for us guests.

Many of the chocolate shops are owned by young men under the age of 30 who are already world ranked *chocolatiers*, run their own business, manage a staff, are married, raising a family and, of course, perpetuating Bayonne's reputation for the most deliciously 'evil' chocolate this side of heaven. //end// (780 words)