

good living

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Melting moments

Sarah Cervoni finds heaven wrapped in the velvety folds of a decadent chocolate-making class.

The group assembles in the spacious kitchen behind the shop front.

Chocolate's ubiquitous appeal is reflected in the sizeable class: there are couples indulging their shared passion, a woman from Tamworth in the city for the weekend and a group of young guys giving their friend a contemporary buck's night, complete with squeezable goddess (a suggestively stuffed pillow from Tokyo) and pretty pinnies. We've also got two women celebrating birthdays and a range of ages and nationalities: French, Australian, American and Japanese.

A glorious afternoon outdoors is forgotten as we immerse ourselves in the secrets of chocolate, presided over by Joseph Atallah, the irrepressible chocolatier, organic chemist, part-time farmer and manic rower who's been selling hand-crafted chocolates from his Leichhardt store for more than a decade: slowly building clientele and a thriving schedule of workshops and dinners.

Everyone gathers around the gleaming steel benches to be introduced into the arcane world of couverture chocolate, whose origins lie, not in Belgium or Switzerland but in a swathe of West African countries embracing the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Uganda and Nigeria. There are also cacao plantations in Indonesia, Ecuador and the Dominican Republic.

Ganache is first up, a blend of chocolate and cream we'll use for our chocolate centres and to which we add flavours: vanilla and whisky, peppermint and orange. There's a steady flow of information and instruction amid numerous finger dips.

Dark chocolate and chilli is an intriguing marriage, with the flavour's arrival deceptively muted but building to a crescendo without the pain.

We then roll some balls of ganache: larger for truffles, smaller



Taste bud... Kimberley Chocolates owner and chocolatier Joseph Atallah and some of his creations. Photos: Marco Del Grande

for the centres. We've soon got hands smothered in chocolate, the mixtures behaving surprisingly differently depending on the flavouring and the temperature of our hands.

Participants cruise the tables like hungry sharks, eyeing their classmates' mixtures, and there's an atmosphere of happy engagement. Atallah steers our efforts and serves espressos, aided by his tireless assistant, Conny, who washes bowls and mixer blades, hands out water and attends to customers at the front of the store. She takes pity on one or two of the men who are having problems with their mixtures and soon has a devoted following.

The secret to good chocolate is in the origin of the cocoa beans, with interesting and intriguing flavour variation. Ugandan



chocolate, which is full of flavour, is "like a good shiraz", while chocolate from New Guinea is surprisingly fruity in contrast, with smoky undertones and a lingering finish.

Conching, or grinding the beans, is another key determinant. The fineness of the grind and its duration help determine the outcome of that velvety smooth, comforting experience that's chocolate. Tempering is important, too, heating and cooling the couverture precisely to achieve the correct crystalline structure, which gives the cool crack of very good chocolate.

Then comes the afternoon's excitement, how to make chocolates. Atallah demonstrates running the moulds through a *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*-like contraption that's churning

shining ribbons of couverture. We level them off, place them on a machine to remove any air bubbles and let them cool.

A short pause, a modest glass of sparkling shiraz for the bridegroom-to-be and the birthday women, then we add the ganache centres. The moulds are conveyed through the chocolate fall and enrobed in rich coats of couverture. Excess air and chocolate are removed and everything is cooled again. To extract them they're turned upside down and twisted, like a tray of ice cubes, and we see our dazzlingly professional-looking chocolates in satisfyingly stuffed boxes.

Fortified by coffee, laughter and the buzz of learning something, we vow to return.

See kimberleychocolates.com.au.