

BEST CHOCOLATE BLISS

The Chocolate Box Café

BY DANI KATZ

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The sun is imploding, the moon is weeping and the squirrels are racing for the hills. Nabbing yourself a chocolate high might be your next logical move. The antioxidants are irrelevant in the face of The Big One, but the bliss factor — well, that's gonna come in handy when the ground begins to rumble and the city starts to crumble around you.

Smart chocolate connoisseurs get their emergency supplies from La Cañada's Chocolate Box Café, which imports its premium-quality confections from Belgium. The chocolate itself is crafted with time-honored artisan techniques, then modernized with unconventional additions such as chili pepper and bergamot. The benefits of globalization are masterfully displayed as teas from the Far East, tropical fruits and exotic spices are infused into truffles, ganaches and delicate swirls of creamy chocolate. This is the best chocolate I've found in this country.

The shop's aesthetic is sophisticated and elegant, with chocolates molded into squares, hearts, leaves and lumps, even a painter's palette and an angular geodesic dome. The ganaches are tiny works of art, printed with eye-catching graphics — bold calligraphy and pop-art imagery indicating mint, cinnamon, grappa or pear.

Even the boxes are feats of design savvy. For the ganaches, you can opt for the sliding tray; for the truffles, a shrunken hat box. Or throw tradition to the revved-up Santa Anas (a sign for many that a quake is near) and choose the Treasure Box, which fans open to reveal three levels of buttermilks, marzipans, swirls, nuts and creams, all drenched in that fine, fine Belgian chocolate.

The café itself has a distinctly European feel — dark brown and orange accents and tiny round tables clustered in front of an L-shaped booth. Beverages (teas, coffees and, of course, chocolate) and gelatos are served at an adjacent counter. You can taste any chocolate you'd like — tiny bits are sliced off and presented to you on a tiny tray, teasers that lure you into an inevitable gorge and ensuing sugar high/crash.

The chocolate is preservative free and highly perishable. It is kept in temperature-controlled storage for no longer than eight weeks. At that time, if the chocolates haven't been eaten (as if!), the café donates them to local charities. One good reason to move to La Cañada and take up volunteer work, before it's too late.

714 Foothill Blvd., La Cañada, (818) 790-7918 or www.chocolateboxcafe.com.