



Give Gifts That Taste Divine: Dark Chocolate Four Ways

Lately, I've been blissed out in my kitchen learning about all things dark chocolate: the history, the nutrition, the tastes, the recipes, and the endless sweet and creative possibilities. And, I keep coming back to the fact that tasty, lower sugar, and "healthier" chocolate treats start in the kitchen, not in a store.

You see, all chocolates aren't made equal and finding a truly delicious and "better for you" chocolate can be near impossible. Commercially bought chocolates are usually processed, full of refined sugars, bad fats, and artificial ingredients, and even the better brand and some organic chocolates (milk, dark, and white) are also packed with sugars and additives that our bodies don't need.

This is a bad thing, because, no matter if the chocolate is milk, dark, or white, our taste buds are programmed to desire it, and, if it's poor quality, the sugars and additives can trigger inflammation, cause unhealthy spikes in blood sugar, and, when eaten in excess, lead to weight gain, diabetes, and sugar addiction.

Of course, such nutritional messaging can cause the body to feel horrible. You know the case, moments of high energy followed by a sugar crash, bad mood, and ravenous hunger.

But, I've learned there is a solution. You can have your chocolate and feel good too! Dark chocolate, made from real, raw, and unprocessed cocoa is healthy, tastes great, and only needs a bit of added sugar to make the chocolate flavors pop. Dark chocolate, when consumed in moderation, won't make you fat or cause your body to crash, but will satisfy your sweet tooth more healthily.

That's why I always create my dark chocolates with real raw cocoa paired with other delectable, high quality, and nutrient dense ingredients.

Real raw cocoa is one of the best sources of antioxidants and 100 grams of pure dark chocolate provides 11 grams of fiber and more than half the daily recommended values for Iron, Magnesium, Copper, and Manganese. Dark chocolate also contains healthy, nourishing, and beautifying fats.

The holiday season, in my opinion, calls for plenty of dark chocolate. Now is the time when I whip up massive batches of dark chocolate bark, dark chocolate hand poured thin mints, delicate dark chocolate molded candies, and my own unique take on the quintessential peanut butter and chocolate cup: dark chocolate, bacon, and peanut cups.

Sure, candy canes and other traditional Christmas treats add to the beauty of the season, and, yes, they taste great. But, they're not good for you. That's why I love to create with dark chocolate. It's the perfect canvas for tiny bits of less healthy ingredients, like candy canes, and, at the same time, it's also perfect for adding lots of healthy ingredients like nuts, seeds, coconut flakes, dried fruits, and berries. Once you get going, you'll see what I mean, with dark chocolate, the possibilities are endless.

Working with dark chocolate is also a great project for the whole family. I always include my boys in the process. They gather and measure the ingredients, melt and pour the chocolate, and sprinkle in the add-ins. I'm always melting, tempering, and formulating new and delicious dark chocolate bark combinations, poured delights, molded treats, and yummy cups.

All of my new dark chocolate recipes were developed using the same dark chocolate base. Start each recipe with my dark chocolate base and build from there. If you plan on making multiple recipes at once, simply increase the proportions accordingly.

Jessa's Dark Chocolate Base

- 1-cup [raw cocoa butter](#) shredded and melted
- 1-cup raw cocoa powder
- 1 Tbsp. Coconut Manna (If you can't find it in the store, Amazon ships quick)
- 1/3-cup raw honey
- 1 tsp. [pure vanilla powder](#) or vanilla extract
- Pinch of [Aztec Sea Salt](#)

Using a cheese grater or micro plane, shred the cocoa butter. After you have one full cup of shredded cocoa butter, place in a double boiler and melt on low heat. Caution, keep your eyes on the stove. Chocolate can burn quickly!

Once the cocoa butter is melted, add in all the other ingredients and whisk until completely smooth.

Dark Chocolate Salted Birds Nest Bark

Prepare the dark chocolate as above.

Line a small baking sheet with parchment paper. I often use a baking sheet, cookie sheet, or a small cake mold that's about 4" inches in diameter.

Sprinkle goji berries, pumpkin seeds, sunflower seeds and coarse salt on the bottom of the pan. You can improvise with alternative ingredients such as raisins, shredded coconut, sesame seeds, poppy seeds, or nuts.

Pour about 1/4 of the melted chocolate over the berry and seed medley.

Allow the dark chocolate to completely cool and set. Then, flip the pan to reveal the berries and the seeds. Break the dark chocolate into pieces of scrumptious bark and enjoy.

Thin Mints

***One hour before making this recipe, place a parchment paper lined metal baking sheet in the freezer. The cold surface will ensure that the chocolate does not spread and the end product will be perfectly round.

After your baking sheet is chilled, prepare the chocolate as above except, instead of using vanilla extract, use peppermint extract.

Once the chocolate is melted down, remove the baking sheet from the freezer. Grab a metal spoon and scoop up small portions of the chocolate. Then, gently dollop the small portions

of the chocolate. Then, gently dollop the small portions onto the cookie sheet. The dollops of chocolate will spread into small thin rounds.

Let the chocolate thin mints set and enjoy!

Mexican Dark Chocolate Cups

Prepare the chocolate as above, but add 1 teaspoon of cinnamon, the zest of one orange, and 1/4 teaspoon of cayenne pepper for a little heat.

Pour the dark chocolate mixture into silicon molds and let completely cool. When the chocolate molds have set, and are ready to be released, simply pop the chocolates out.

Silicon molds come in many different shapes, styles, and sizes. You can purchase them in culinary stores.

Dark Chocolate, Peanut & Bacon Cups

Prepare 3 strips of crisp bacon and let cool. When the bacon is completely cool, break into smaller pieces, about 1/4 inch in size and set to the side.

Dry roast one cup of peanuts at 350° F for about 10 - 15 minutes.

Prepare the dark chocolate exactly as above.

After the chocolate is completely melted, fill cup shaped molds half way. Place one roasted peanut and a couple of the bacon bits into the chocolate filled cups. Cover the rest of the cup with the remaining dark chocolate, top with a few more peanuts, and garnish with an additional piece of bacon.

When your barks, molds, and cups are complete, reserve a few batches for entertaining, share some with your family, and package up for gifts.

Remember, you don't have to put out unhealthy holiday treats. Do what I do, replace them with nourishing, delectable, and dark, dark chocolate!