

DESSERTED

Recipes *and* Tales *from an* Island Chocolatier

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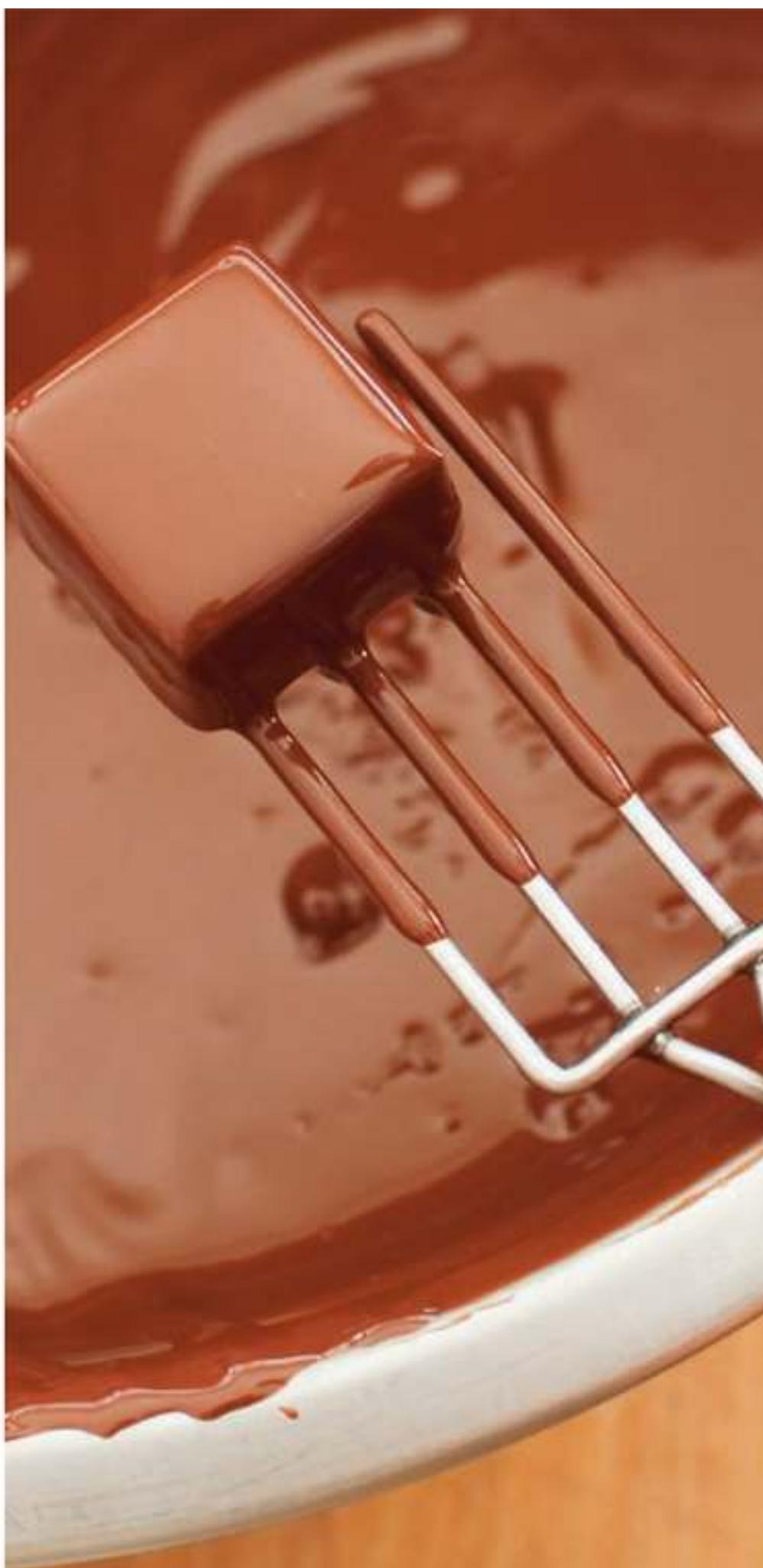
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This book is dedicated to my husband and business partner, Steve, who — according to my refractometer — runs at a steady, cool-headed 88.8 degrees; the perfect tempering agent for a life charted toward unknowable horizons.





Foreword

Not long ago, I was reluctantly making small talk with a woman whom I was standing behind in an airport security line in Seattle, Washington. When asked, I told her that I am from Maine. She dug deeper, inquiring as to where in Maine I lived. My stock reply, “You’ve never heard of it,” did not suffice, and she insisted upon knowing more. “A small island off the coast,” I answered, diverting my eyes as to discourage any further dialogue.

“Which one?” She was relentless.

Well, here goes, I thought. She will either scowl, shrug and agree that the place name is totally foreign to her, or she will recognize both the name and me. The latter scenario usually leads to far more discussion of *The Perfect Storm*, my books, and a certain Discovery Channel television series than I have patience for. “I live on Isle au Haut,” I said and crossed my fingers.

The woman’s eyes lit up with the excitement of the recognition that I dreaded. “Black Dinah chocolate!” She exclaimed. Stunned and delighted, I nearly initiated a high-five. I now had no reservations, and enthusiastically held up my end of the conversation. I proudly explained that Kate Shaffer is my neighbor and dear friend. We talked island life and chocolate all the way through the security checkpoint and to where we parted ways to find our respective gates. The woman’s parting words were, “You are so lucky.”

When Kate first arrived on Isle au Haut, all I knew about her I learned through the rumor mill. And the grand sum of that was that she had moved to Maine from California. On our island, she may as well have come from Mars. Yet Kate’s observations and insights of the island and its people ring as true as the lobsters and blueberries that define our home. Kate writes beautifully of our quirky place with her unique way of articulating a sense of place shared by all islanders. This coupled with some of her chocolate recipes; what a treat!

And to think that up until the time when Kate made her first chocolate, Black Dinah was merely a lump, in fact a poor excuse for a mountain, among a few others that cast rather short shadows on Isle au Haut, or High Island. In the wake of Kate’s well-deserved success, Black Dinah denotes something monumental indeed. Black Dinah is the answer to what happens when dreams are pursued. Black Dinah is what results when hard work, perseverance, passion, and raw talent come together. Black Dinah chocolates are the perfect reflection of their creator. They are beautiful. They are simply the best. And the woman in the airport was right. I am so lucky.

— Linda Greenleaf

Introduction

MAKING A LIVING INTO A LIFE

I first came to the island as a cook. I knew no one, had never had an interest in Isle au Haut beyond a cool job, working for nice folks. Cooking was my only way of moving through this new world, 3,000 miles away from my lifetime home of California. It was that single-mindedness that propelled me through learning the ropes at my new job—a job, the likes of which I had never experienced before. And will never again.

“Are you a school-trained chef?” my new employers, the owners, of the Keepers House Inn, asked me when we first met at their off-island home in the drear of an early Maine spring in 2001.

“No,” I answered matter-of-factly, bracing for yet another interview in which I assure my potential employers that I can cook, regardless of my lack of any sort of piece of paper that says I can.

“Good,” Jeff Burke breathed. “Those culinary school graduates never last on Isle au Haut.”

Jeff and Judi peppered me with questions about my life and what had brought me to Maine. They asked me about my family, about Steve, if I had ever lived on an island before. Did I have children? A dog? Could I chop wood? Did I have a boat?

What they didn’t ask me, beyond that first peculiar question, was anything about my life as a cook. I had said I could cook, and that was enough for them. I left the interview puzzled, and curious about a place that required such a quirky set of skills, was home to these gently aging hippies, and yet chewed up and spat out classically trained chefs.

My “try-out” came a month later. It was April, as the winter snows had finally begun to recede on the coast of Maine. I drove through an icy gray fog, in the half-light of a quiet dawn. My dog, an immense Akita/Lab mix, rode shotgun with her nose out the window in the morning air. I found my way unguided through the tiny fishing village of Stonington, to the deserted wood-plank dock, and onto the morning mailboat headed to Isle au Haut. Construction workers stood smoking in the open air of the boat, sipping from Styrofoam cups of coffee, congregating in affable early morning silence. They greeted me with nods, and grunted a few “ayuh”s when I asked if this was the ferry to Isle au Haut, after which they returned their attention to their cigarettes and coffee and I to the overheated cabin, where I settled in for the sunrise ride out to the tiny island that would, in just a few short years change the whole course of my life.

My try-out was to make lunch for a work crew of ten men and women who were scattered around the inn property painting, cleaning, cutting up the winter’s blow-down, repairing bicycles, and any number of other tasks required to get the property ready for the new season’s guests. Judi led me to the kitchen, showed me where the pots and pans were, how to work the temperamental stove, and left me with a simple, good-natured warning: “Of course, we want it to be delicious, but it’s more important that there’s a lot. Those people are hungry.”





GENEVA SUE
ISLE AU HAUT



It took me half the morning to take inventory of the unfamiliar kitchen and its ingredients—~~heavy in dried beans and grains, raw sugars and syrups, organic meats and oils, and a basket full of some early spring gleanings of produce from the mainland grocery.~~

After a quick refresher course from Judi in the making of fresh bread (after discovering there would be none unless I made it), I got to work on an enormous pot of black bean stew, spiked with smoked chiles and Portuguese sausage; thick, hot slabs of fresh cornbread, fragrant with orange zest and clove honey; a soft oat bread, dark with molasses; and a simple green salad, dressed just as simply with generous drizzles of extra virgin olive oil, red wine vinegar, sea salt, and a few turns of freshly ground pepper.

Lunch was more than an hour late, but the food was hot and hearty, and, most importantly, there was enough of it. I had won myself a job.

I spent the next five years working in that homey kitchen, creating meals that were—if a bit more refined than that first (though not always as successful)—on some level, just as satisfying for both cook and consumer.



It was also in that kitchen that I developed my baking skills by making bread, pies, and cakes every day from scratch. And it was in that kitchen that I had my first disastrous close encounters with that most aggravating of ingredients: chocolate.

There are no second chances in an island kitchen. If you forget something at the mainland grocery, guess what? You do without. If the farmer doesn't have that case of produce picked in time for you to make the morning mailboat, guess what? You spend the boat ride over figuring out how to sell some very high-paying inn guests on cuisine *sans* vegetables. If the Monday night's fish doesn't make the last boat from Stonington, you have island lobster for the second night in a row. And most importantly, you know the inventory of every cupboard, refrigerator, freezer, and fish crate on the island.

That being said, island kitchens are also the most friendly places on earth. There is always a pot of hot coffee, a stool to sit on, an open cookbook to peruse. There is often a task to help with, and something to learn from a kind cook who is unfettered by the pressure of a restaurant pace or the quest for perfection. Instead, island cooks are governed by the ebb and flow of sunshine, of rain, of gentle gossip, and small-town political intrigue. They plan their menus around a neighbor's birthday, a particularly good catch, a lobster-man's new boat or in anticipation of a contentious town meeting. They are not subject to a particular style or tradition; but rather, they let their menus reflect the peculiar micro culture around them. Island cooks always have an answer to the oft-asked question from a passing tourist: "What is it like to live here?"

Here. Taste. Today, it's like this.

In early 2005, Jeff and Judi announced that they would be retiring and closing the inn at the end of the coming season. I received this news via a crackly telephone conversation in the kitchen of our rented cabin on Isle au Haut. At the time, Steve and I had been navigating our first island nor'easter; whipping blizzard that left us trapped in our home with frozen pipes, and which had us melting snow for drinking water and morning coffee. The news and the situation were further aggravated by the fact that my aging dog was quickly fading to the pain of bone cancer, and we were facing the surety of her death in the coming days.

Weeks later, in the darkest days of that winter, I found myself restless and alone in my kitchen. Steve had been spending the weekdays working on the mainland while I stayed on the island to write and take reservations via phone and email for the inn's last season. I often turn to my kitchen cupboards for comfort; somehow, the time and focus it takes to make a meal from scratch eases my mind. But at the time, I had no appetite for hearty dinners. Instead, I craved a small bite of something a morsel with a perfect balance of crunch and softness, of sweet and buttery. And of something else I couldn't quite put my finger on. I tried cookies and biscuits, ice cream, cake. Too much, too little, too sweet, lacking the ingredient I couldn't quite place.

And then I stumbled upon a recipe for chocolate truffles I had torn from the pages of *Gourmet* years before. I had wanted to try it for the inn guests, but the complicated, untried recipe always got shuffled out of my weekly rotation of well-tested standbys.

That recipe took over my tiny cottage kitchen one long winter night: an alchemy of chocolate and cream, butter and egg yolks transformed into a satiny slab of pudding-like ganache that sat atop a pleasingly chewy chocolate brownie base. After allowing the slab to set in the refrigerator, I carefully cut the entire thing into one-inch cubes, and *voila!* Like magic, I had a neat little pile of my very first chocolates.

It's hard to explain how these little truffles became the answer to my unidentified craving. I spent hours just looking at them before I tried one. They were perfectly shaped, consistently sized, and utterly appealing to the eye. At first glance, they all looked exactly alike, but on closer inspection each seemed to express its own tiny personality. I twisted each one into a small square of parchment, then

wrapped them in colored tissue paper and tied them with twine. And it wasn't until I had them all packaged for delivery that it occurred to me to try one of the remainders.

That it was delicious wasn't a surprise. That it was what I had been wanting all those weeks, was. I ate one, and I felt better. A lot better.

And so I guess in many ways that's when the seed was planted. That very visceral and emotional reaction to an ingredient I had never thought much about. In the season that followed that winter, chocolate found its way into many dishes at the inn—both sweet and savory. And then it found its way onto my list of possible futures on the island. And then it was the only thing on the list. And then my life began to take shape around it.

The recipes, vignettes, and instructions waiting for you in the following pages tell the story of how all happened.

— *Kate Shaff*





CHOOSING YOUR CHOCOLATE

When Steve and I got the notion to go into the chocolate business, we knew pretty much zilch about it. All I knew was that if we were going into the chocolate business, then we needed chocolate. So, while Steve was doing the hard work of creating a business model from twigs and island spruce needles, I hopped the morning mailboat and went shopping.

I had a working knowledge of modern chocolate terminology, so when I found myself on the mainland in front of the chocolate counter at my favorite gourmet food store, I had a pretty good idea of what I was looking for. Not that it mattered. I was a woman on a mission, and my mission was to discover the very best chocolate with which to make my truffles. So, I bought every bar in front of me. Oh, and a cup of coffee. And a bottle of wine. The cashier didn't bother with discretion. "Bad day?" she asked.

Since Steve and I weren't making chocolate solely for ourselves, we felt that it would be important to get some other input besides our own. On a quiet mid-winter night, when there was nothing to do on the island but wonder what our neighbors were up to and who they were up to it with, we instead held an informal chocolate tasting. A group that consisted of a handful of lobstermen and carpenters, a boat builder, the school teacher, tax collector, innkeeper, park ranger, lighthouse keeper, and a selectman reported to our small living room for duty, received a brief explanation on how to approach their task and then got down to work. It was a fairly structured blind tasting; which basically means that I unwrapped all the bars I had bought earlier in the day, laid them out on a numbered grid scribbled on a large piece of butcher paper, and then handed each taster a sheet that had a table of attributes I wanted them to pay attention to.

After the dust settled, there was a clear winner. And I really, really wish I could tell you that the chocolate that won the taste test that night was the chocolate we ended up ultimately using in our truffles. But it's not. There are, unfortunately, other factors we needed to consider, such as cost and availability, which quickly disqualified several of the chocolates we tried. Instead, second place received the honors, and it ended up being the right choice all around.

So, what does this all mean for you and how you choose the chocolate you use for the recipes in this book—and beyond?

For the most part, all of the chocolate work and recipes described in this book can be done with a quality chocolate you'd probably be able to find on the shelf of your local grocery store. Even our grocery store, which consists of three twelve-foot aisles, is open for two hours, three days a week, and caters to an off-season population of forty-five people, carries chocolates suitable for a batch of French-style truffles.

However, it might help if you make a list of criteria—what you want and don't want in your chocolate—before you start purchasing bars for your tasting. Here are some possible questions to ask yourself:

Is it important that your chocolate be fair trade?

What about organic?

Do you want a single origin chocolate, or is a blend okay?

What's your price range?

How easily can you get it? And how quickly?

These days, buying a bar of chocolate can be as intimidating as buying a bottle of wine. To this, I

say, “Whatever.” Here’s the deal: if it tastes good, it is good. And by that I mean that I’ve found that Vianne Rocher (the beautiful chocolatier in the luscious movie *Chocolat*) was right: everyone really does have a favorite, and it rarely has anything to do with how much it costs, how shiny the label is, and whether or not it has a French name. Most of us, if we’re breathing, have been eating chocolate since we were babies. We learned to like it before we knew how to explain why we liked it, or what exactly we liked about it. I call this the Zen mind of chocolate. We don’t have to learn, as with wine, what we like and don’t like. We already have a developed palate with chocolate; we already know what we like.

WHAT EXACTLY IS CHOCOLATE?

Chocolate comes from the seeds of a cacao tree, *Theobroma cacao*, native to tropical regions of the Americas and cultivatable in regions between zero and twenty degrees latitude, north or south of the equator.

Modern chocolate making is basically a six-step process, which is still, surprisingly, much like how it all began.

STEP 1: HARVEST AND SEED EXTRACTION

The fruit of the cacao tree are ridged football-shaped pods that vary in color from green to yellow/orange and red. They grow directly out of the trunk of the tree and are harvested by hand by knocking them off the trunk with a stick or by cutting them off with a machete. The pods are then split lengthwise (again, usually with a machete) to expose a mass of almond-size seeds encased in a sticky white mucilage.

STEP 2: FERMENTATION

Next, the seeds (or beans, as they are more commonly called) are scooped out of the pod and heaped in a pile or into wooden crates to ferment. The heat created by fermentation helps to melt off the gooey white stuff, so that all that is left is the seed. The heat also kills the germination process and is key to beginning to develop the full flavor of the seed. This process takes anywhere between three and nine days.

STEP 3: DRYING

After fermenting, the beans are spread onto racks—either freestanding racks or roof-mounted ones—or tossed out onto roads or whatever flat surface is available in great quantities, and allowed to dry in the sun. Drying takes from seven to thirty days.

STEP 4: ROASTING

After drying, the beans are ready to roast. Some producers choose to age their beans for a quantity of time before roasting. The benefit of aging is primarily flavor development, and those who employ this practice feel that it is key to the quality of their final product. But whether or not the producer chooses to age their beans or not, roasting is where the true art of chocolate production takes flight.

STEP 5: SORTING, FLINGING, AND CONCHING

Once the beans are roasted to the producer’s specifications, the beans are sorted and then placed in a bean flinger (yes, that’s the technical term). The flinger cracks off the hull of the bean, so all that is left is the nib—essentially, the meat of the bean. The nibs are then placed in a conche—sort of like a burr coffee grinder multiplied by a million—which grinds the beans down into a fluid mass that is kept liquefied by frictional heat. This fluid mass is called chocolate liquor, and while that made me

pretty excited, too, the first time I heard the term, it has nothing to do with alcohol. Conching reduces the cocoa mass into particles too small to be detected by the human tongue. How small these particles get are a factor in the quality of the final product. The smaller the particles, the smoother the mouthfeel of the chocolate.

STEP 6: TEMPERING AND MOLDING

Depending on what kind of chocolate the producer is making (dark, milk, or unsweetened), sugar, vanilla, milk powder (if making milk chocolate), and, in most cases, soy lecithin (used as an emulsifying agent, which also helps with mouthfeel), are added to the chocolate liquor. The melted mass is then heated and cooled very carefully—a process called tempering—and poured into molds to form bricks or bars (or whatever shape the producer sells its final product in), cooled until set, and then released from the molds and packaged.

CHOCOLATE TERMINOLOGY

COCOA BUTTER: This is the highly valued fat from the cocoa bean. Cocoa butter is produced by pressing the beans to separate the fat from the solids. The by-product of this process is cocoa powder.

NATURAL COCOA POWDER: This is the result of extracting the fat from the cocoa bean, and then grinding what's left into a powder.

DUTCHED OR DUTCH-PROCESS COCOA POWDER: This is cocoa powder treated with an alkaline substance in order to reduce acidity and darken the color. Dutch-process cocoa powder is more readily dissolved in liquids such as water or milk.

UNSWEETENED CHOCOLATE: Remember the chocolate liquor created in Step Five above? Well, this is it. Unadulterated chocolate that may or may not have extra cocoa butter or soy lecithin added to it. But never sugar or milk. The form you buy at the market has been tempered and molded into bars, and is often called baking chocolate or cooking chocolate.

DARK CHOCOLATE: This is cocoa liquor, some amount of sugar, usually vanilla, and sometimes soy lecithin. Basically, there are two types of dark chocolate: bittersweet and semisweet. For the most part, the two can be used interchangeably.

BITTERSWEET CHOCOLATE: This is a slightly sweetened dark chocolate that, according to the FDA, contains no less than 35% cocoa.

SEMISWEET CHOCOLATE: This is dark chocolate that has more sugar than bittersweet chocolate.

MILK CHOCOLATE: This is chocolate that contains, according to the FDA, no less than 10% cocoa solids and 12% milk solids.

WHITE CHOCOLATE: This is chocolate that contains cocoa butter, milk solids, and sugar, but no cocoa solids.

CACAO: Technically, this is what cocoa beans are called before they are roasted. However, the term is now used interchangeably with cocoa.

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