

· BECOMING A CONNOISSEUR ·

CHOCOLATE BUYER

Are you looking for the best job in the world? Well, here it is! What could be better than being the Chocolate Buyer at Fortnum & Mason's world-renowned Food Hall?

Do you think you have what it takes to be this unique and innovative individual, able to inspire others with your passion for chocolate?

If you are this person then tell us why you believe that you can make a difference. We are looking for enthusiasm, creative flair and energy to develop the already divine range of products available.

Nearly every one of those 23 emails said, 'You were born for this'! And by this time, thanks to my extracurricular interests in the chocolate world, I had amassed enough experience to give me a decent chocolate-oriented CV – even though I had never attended a cooking or chocolate school. I sent my CV to Fortnum & Mason and was selected from a field of 3,000 – a turning point in my choco-life!

A day in the life of a chocolate connoisseur

People are always fascinated to know how a chocoholic who works with chocolate spends her day... 'So, do you really eat chocolate all day long?' my suppliers ask. Well, I didn't need the excuse of working in the chocolate business to start eating a pound of it a day – I've been doing that for long enough. But, yes, it is true... I do spend the day eating chocolate! Some for work, most for pleasure.

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5 am: My stereo wakes me up with classical music. I stay in bed, eyes closed, enjoying the music.

5:15 am: Brush my teeth and prepare the tasting tray. I will wait until 45 minutes after brushing my teeth as the toothpaste would otherwise still be polluting my taste buds. I have normally decided on the theme of my tasting the night before, and a box of samples (many from suppliers wanting me to buy their chocolate for Fortnum & Mason) is waiting in the kitchen. (The rest of my personal chocolate stock is stored in a special cool, dark room.)

6.00 am: I have my first chocolate tasting of the day! This is the best time, when my palate is completely clean and fully receptive to the aromas and flavours I am about to encounter.

6.45 am: I head for the local swimming pool, where I swim for an hour a day nonstop (around 2km). Exercise is absolutely essential if you eat a lot of chocolate! The chocolate I eat provides an entire day's worth of calories, so swimming helps to make room for the other foods I need. I also do a lot of brisk walking and power yoga. Just as with listening (*really* listening!) to good music, these activities give me a sense of well-being, a harmony between body and mind, which I find essential. It helps me to eliminate any mental 'chatter' and listen fully to my senses while tasting.

8.40 am: Back on the Tube for the 20-minute journey to work. I take this opportunity to catch up on any chocolate-related reading.

9.00 am: I arrive at Fortnum & Mason and go straight to the shop floor to pick myself an assortment of chocolate. The

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filled chocolates I like are mainly nuts with chocolate (hazelnut or almond *bâtonnets* in chocolate, the nutty pralinés, lemon peel in milk chocolate (one I introduced to Fortnum & Mason), a plain dark truffle using beans from Madagascar. Then I select three plain dark chocolate bars (generally two favourites, and one more that I want to rediscover). My morning kit weighs 350g, the bars represent 225g of it – and it will be usually be finished by lunchtime at 2pm. I spit out everything I taste.

You're probably thinking, 'That's a *lot* of chocolate!' Well, it is, but I have to thank my taste buds for having a natural inclination towards nutty fillings rather than creamy ones. They're much less fattening, and the dark chocolate with nuts combination is actually pretty healthy. And, of course, ganaches are far more fattening than bars or pralinés.

9.15 am: I have breakfast at my desk as I check my work emails. If I start eating chocolate now, it will become an exclusively chocolate breakfast as I never mix chocolate with any other food – and I try not to do this more than twice a week. My regular breakfast is either fruit or a plain full-fat (full flavour!) yogurt.

9.30 am: The first phone call of the day from a potential supplier. 'My name is X. Our company sells outstanding confectionary products and I would be grateful if you could make some time to meet me...'

My response is standard. 'Thank you for your call, X; however, I would love to meet your chocolates first and I will leave it to my palate to decide if we shall meet. Please could you send me samples with the prices, shelf-life, ingredients list and availability over the year? I also need to know how long you take to deliver, who else in the UK sells your

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chocolate; and I would ask you to label your samples so that I know in advance what they are. Please also package those with alcohol separately.'

By then they usually say that they would like to see my reaction as I taste their wonderful chocolate.

'I totally understand and respect that. However, I taste at 6 am at home. If you wish to leave me your telephone number I will let you know when I plan to do the tasting and you may join me.'

Unsurprisingly, I haven't yet had a supplier take me up on this... and in fact, no one has even got as far as asking for my address!

10 am: I am called to the shop floor. A couple of Dutch tourists are looking for a bar I have never heard of, so I get them to describe it, then show them a few products I think they will find very similar. I also take the opportunity of introducing them to our range of plantation and single-origin bars. I know my eyes must be twinkling because I am very proud of this range, which is unique in the UK.

I have excited their curiosity and they decide to buy a set of four different bars. These two people make my day. I have somehow 'brought the choco-light' to them – it's a small thing, but, brick by brick, one can slowly construct a temple.

When I visit the chocolate counter, I watch the way customers select the chocolates and if I see any hesitation, I propose my assistance. Whether they are buying for themselves or as a present, I see it as an opportunity for them to discover a few different chocolates, close to those they like and are used to, but a step closer to the temple of fine chocolate!

10.30 am: Next, I systematically look at the filled chocolates in the fridges, spotting bloomed or damaged ones, which I

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then have removed. A bloomed chocolate, which looks grey or dull, has suffered from a too-fast change of temperature and humidity. It will still taste good but aesthetics are part of the pleasure, and in one of the finest department stores in the world, everything needs to be perfect.

Happily, there's no need for these chocolates to go to waste. Any bloomed chocolates go to the staff canteen – I love to see people's faces illuminated as they see the chocolates on offer. I feel like Father Christmas!

10.40 am: Back at my desk, my selection of chocolates by my side, I try to focus on the pile of paperwork – correspondence, orders, and complaints. When I bring a new product in – to refresh the range or to upgrade quality – I have to take one out to make space, and I then get letters from customers surprised and disappointed about the change. It is hard to please everybody, and I just hope that they will one day try one of the new ones.

11.30 am: We have a meeting to select the products we will present in the Christmas catalogue. This has to be started at least ten months ahead of Christmas.

2 pm: Lunch. After lunch, usually salad and a sandwich, I will not eat chocolate for at least two hours (or up to four if I have been taken out for a heavy lunch). If I do feel the urge, I go for a bite of Michael Recchiuti's 85% – I find this high-cocoa, good-quality bar the only pleasant chocolate to eat after a meal. Even 75% cocoa chocolate seems too sugary, and not sufficiently chocolatey, eaten close to a meal. Most of the time I go for cocoa nibs, though, which are perfect when you are not feeling like sweets but want to taste something that stirs your senses.

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2:30 pm: Meeting with my assistant. We share information and tasks, and decide on products we wish to carry as Christmas novelties.

3.30 pm: I receive a call from the Italian chamber of commerce. I am invited to spend three days in Turin for their big annual chocolate show. I will have a series of meetings with the little-known small business confectioners who make Italy's best little chocolate jewels. I immediately make two more phone calls. One to book my flight, and the other to Domori, whose factory in Italy makes astonishingly expensive chocolate. This makes liking their bars a pricey pleasure, but I am nevertheless amazed by them, as they trigger a new set of feelings in my mouth.

Domori's brochures are so sophisticated and complete (they even created a chocolate quality code – which they have to stick to!) that I want to know more about the company. Furthermore, competitors tell me Domori don't work from the bean (which means they are buying their cocoa mass from another company, and just melt, blend, temper and mould). I am intrigued by this, because the chocolate tastes like no other I have tried, and I want to see with my own eyes what they are doing. Working for Fortnum & Mason opens almost all doors to me, and allows me to deepen my knowledge and the scope of sharing it.

5 pm: I feel like having a chocolate that's not in my box, so I pop down to the storeroom and examine the boxes. Hmmmm. A good opportunity to check all the sell-by dates and stock levels. I remove any box whose shelf-life is too short to be sold – I need to make sure it doesn't accidentally end up on the shop floor.

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6 pm: My assistant and I make a comparative tasting of raw materials such as candied ginger or orange. Improving our range also means encouraging the companies that produce Fortnum & Mason-branded chocolates to improve the quality of their raw material. I then negotiate prices and organise a delivery at their production unit – ensuring that everything goes according to plan.

6.30 pm: At the end of the working day, I will go to a yoga class, then return home to eat dinner, relax by listening to music, and then catch up with emails from my friends in the worlds of chocolate, perfume, tea and coffee, eager to get updated on the fight for quality elsewhere in the world.

What does it take?

Anyone can eat and enjoy chocolate, but you have to go the extra mile to develop your knowledge if you want to be taken seriously in the chocolate world.

- Acquaint yourself with chocolate, tasting every new bar on the market (but stick to the quality market – forget anything else!).
- Develop your own chocolate database, noting aromas, flavours and textures of new bars. Go back to Chapters 2 and 4 to find out more about how you should do this.
- Attend chocolate events – there are annual chocolate shows in London, Paris, New York, San Francisco, Tokyo, and even in Russia now! Here you will meet the names behind the bars, and pick up all the news that only chocolate insiders are normally privy to.