

The five-sense test

To taste – be it chocolate, wine, tea, coffee or cheese – you need to engage all five senses. The wine critic Jancis Robinson explains this methodology very clearly and entertainingly in her book *How to Taste*, which I thoroughly recommend to anyone who wants to become an expert. But here I will cover the basics.

1. Use your eyes

Look at the piece of chocolate you are about to taste, evaluating its texture before you put it in your mouth. The surface

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should be smooth and shiny, indicating that the cocoa butter is properly crystallised (tempered). Do not be swayed by the colour. There are few rules about what colour is best, and the shade of chocolate colour is influenced by many factors such as bean type and roasting time as well as milk content.

2. Touch it

Is it soft or hard? Sticky, grainy, sandy or velvety? Crisp or crunchy? Getting to know the feel of a chocolate will help you recognise it again in the future. It will also help you to identify quality. The smoother the texture, the more unctuous it will be in the mouth. The finer the chocolate's particles, the greater the aromas you will find in it.

3. Listen to it

Even your ability to hear affects taste – and loss of hearing can give the impression that a food has a strange taste. Tuning in to the sound that your chocolate makes when you break it is another way of familiarising yourself with the product, and assessing its quality. Did it break easily? Neatly? Drily? A chocolate that snaps without too much effort is a sign that the balance between cocoa and butter is right. Dark chocolate snaps more easily than milk because, unlike milk chocolate, it contains no milk powder.

4. Smell it

Taste is ninety per cent smell. Our sensing equipment seems to pick up subtleties in aroma or vapour that we cannot detect in solids and liquids. You will have noticed that food is more tasteless when you have a cold and your nose is blocked up. You may even lose your appetite for it because there is nothing to savour.

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The vapour given off by food or drink and warmed up in the mouth has two routes to the brain. When we sniff it, with the aim of taking in its odour, the vapour travels up our nose to the olfactory receptors at the top. When we are tasting, the same vapour takes a back route, from the back of the mouth, up what's called the retro-nasal passage, to the same sensory organ.

To test the affect that smell has on taste, try holding your nose and chewing a piece of flavoursome food. Then repeat the same exercise with your nose liberated.

THE ODOUR OF QUALITY

I have occasionally been invited to taste chocolate 'live' on TV. On one occasion I shocked the presenter by categorising the unwrapped 'mystery' chocolates as either 'cheap and poor quality' or 'interesting and probably expensive' before I had even put them in my mouth. 'But how do you know?' she asked. 'You haven't even tasted them!'

'No, but I smelled them,' I told her, thrilled at the thought that the thousands of people watching would now know how much you can learn from smelling a chocolate! Cheap chocolate is easily identified by its overpowering smell of vanilla and sugar, and good-quality chocolate is all about wondrous aromas – the woody, spicy and floral smells I've mentioned.

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Our sense of smell is a bit like a memory bank. You know yourself how the smell of freshly cut grass may bring back memories of your childhood, how the scent of freshly shelled peas can take you back to your grandmother's kitchen in the summer, and how the smell of perfume or aftershave can remind you of the loved one who wears it. (Eau Sauvage always brings back thoughts of my father, for example.) It takes practice to describe a chocolate's 'nose', but we do so by relating aromas to those in our past experience. 'The more we penetrate odours,' observed the great twentieth-century perfumer and philosopher Edmond Roudnitska, 'the more they end up possessing us. They live within us, becoming an integral part of us, participating in a new function within us.'

The problem is that, in today's world, we are so bombarded by artificial smells that many of us have lost our database of natural scents. Sadly, when a lot of people smell a fine chocolate for the first time, they do not recognise it as chocolate. For them, chocolate should smell of sugar and vanilla! But practice makes perfect – to coin a cliché.

Good cocoa smells often remind us of natural products – fruit, flowers, woodlands or spice. A chocolate that smells smoky may have been carelessly dried. One that smells mouldy has been damaged in storage. You can build up your database of smells by using your nose whenever and wherever you can – not only when you are smelling chocolate.

Experience the scents of wet weather. If you're in the woods, smell the soil and the leaves. Breathe in the odour of a tree trunk. When you go to the market, take a sniff of each basket of mushrooms, herbs, fruit and flowers. Do all this and you will rediscover the potential of your sense of smell. We all have the ability, but many of us have forgotten it.

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5. Taste it

When tasting a new chocolate, try just a small, fingernail-sized piece. Put it on your tongue and chew for a few seconds to break it into smaller chunks. Then stop and allow it to melt so that all flavours are released. Make sure the chocolate is spread all around your mouth – this way you’ll taste the flavours most intensely.

Flavours

When the taste of a wonderful chocolate reverberates long after we have consumed the chocolate, that indicates our olfactory system is going into overdrive. Our taste buds play a relatively minor role, picking up only crude definitions: sweet, acid, salty and bitter.

When you start tasting truly good chocolate, you will find that its flavour can linger for many minutes. This is the best incentive I can think of to invest in an expensive bar. It may cost three times as much as your usual bar, but the pleasure you’ll get from it is intense and long.

The flavour of chocolate comes from the combination of several of the basic tastes listed opposite. Sugar, and slightly acidic beans, can both act in the same way – in small quantities, they’ll enhance the flavour but in larger quantities they drown it out. (Try a 99% bar once when you’re feeling brave. Without the sugar, chocolate is a very different beast!) Fine chocolate has harmonious tastes – you’ll need to concentrate to sense their presence. Look out in particular for bitterness, acidity and astringency. The first two are welcome, but astringency is a bad sign, often found in poor-quality chocolate. Next, I’ll show you how to identify these tastes.

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Sweetness

Sweetness is tasted at the tip of the tongue. My simple rule with sweetness is this: if you notice the sugar, if it annoys you slightly, there is too much of it in the bar. Excess sugar is used to disguise poor-quality or uninteresting beans, covering up the burnt, metallic or mouldy flavours you might otherwise taste.

Each time you taste a new chocolate, think about the sugar. Is it noticeable? Does it override the other flavours?

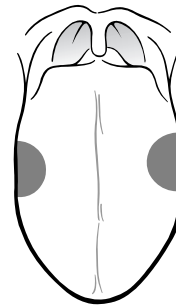


sweet

Bitterness, sourness and acidity

When I introduce novices to real chocolate, many use the word 'bitter' to describe it. (And it's the same word that often springs to people's lips when tasting tea or coffee, interestingly.) It is their way of qualify-ing a new taste that is a bit more intense than they are used to. Nine times out of ten, it is not the most accurate word to use. Poor-quality chocolate may be astringent (drying or puckering – like chewing a grape skin).

Alternatively, what you're tasting (if it doesn't seem sour) may be acidity. Try sniffing something very high in acidity, like vinegar, and notice how the edges of your tongue curl up in anticipation of how it will taste in your mouth. Acidity has a very strong effect on the sides of the tongue. Start smelling things routinely and you will realise how important a component acidity is in everything from milk to fruit.



acidic

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True *bitterness* is felt in the middle at the back of the tongue. Test it in foods like chicory or grapefruit, to see how your mouth responds. Guanaja from Valrhona is rather bitter, but in such a mild and elegant way you'll hardly feel it.

With some training, you'll even detect chocolates that begin with one flavour (sweetness, for example) and evolve to another (say, bitterness) with a hint of a third (salty) e.g. Lindt 99%.

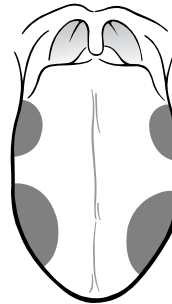


bitter

Saltiness

Saltiness is one of the first tastes you notice, and it lasts longer than sweetness. To familiarise yourself with the effect it has on your tongue, swirl some salty water around in your mouth.

Salt is unusual in chocolate but you can find it in some filled chocolates (it enhances the nuttiness in pralines) or in bars like Domori's Latte Sal or 99% Lindt. Here it would be used to reveal particular aromas from the beans or the nuts – in the same way that a little salt brings out the flavour in food.



salty

Describing aromas and flavours

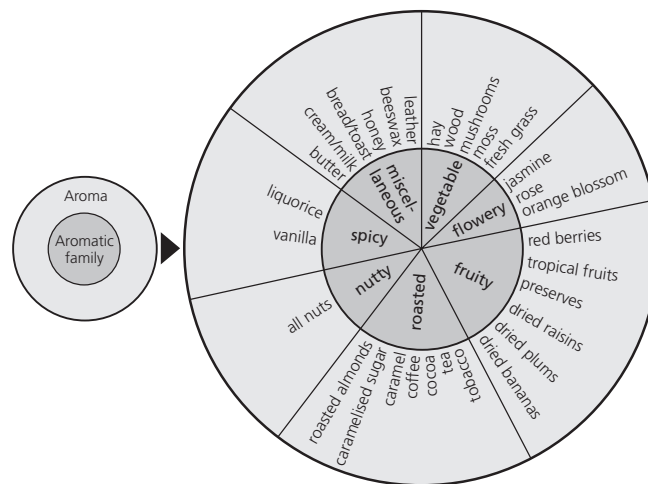
The last part of tasting consists in trying to find the words to describe the aromas and flavours you detect. This is very hard as we are not used to associating a word with a taste

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sensation. Bite any square of fine dark chocolate, and try to describe the aromas and flavours, not just whether you like it or not. You might not be able to find the words to describe it.

I understand this completely. I've felt it myself, and I've seen it many times in my tasting workshops: you end up with a blank notepad. To make it easier, I suggest you proceed as for a wine tasting: try to find associations with the world around you. When you taste, close your eyes and think, 'What does this remind me of?'

In the beginning, try at least to work out which 'family' the chocolate reminds you of. Use the entries on the inner ring of the chart below as guidance or inspiration.



This tasting wheel will help you develop your own choco-vocabulary

Try it yourself! Take a square of Valrhona's Manjari. Pop a small piece into your mouth, and once the initial burst of acidity lowers, see if you can notice the clear red fruit notes.

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In the beginning, if you can at least identify ‘fruity’, this is excellent. Later on, as your ability to identify flavours and aromas grows, you’ll be able to fit more specific words to tastes. You can move from tasting Java from Pralus as ‘vegetable’ to something more accurate, for example, wood or even better, a wet forest.

Find words that sum up what *you* taste, not what you think you should taste, or what someone else has tasted. On a graph, you could draw up one curve for the ‘intensity’ of the flavours: in their initial attack, in their development, and in their finish. You may taste ‘flowery’ followed by ‘woody’ and then ‘woody flirting with spicy’.

CHECKLIST FOR TASTING

Try doing the following exercise with a square of chocolate:

1. Look at it: what do you see? Colour? Shine? Texture? Blooming or discolouration?
2. Touch it: what do you feel? How does the broken surface look: smooth or rough and bubbly? Sticky?
3. Listen to it: what do you hear as you snap a square in half?
4. Smell it: what do you find?
5. Taste it: analyse only the texture. Notice its effect on your tongue. How does it feel in your mouth?

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The simple approach is a good one to start with, and is what I use in my tasting workshops. If you want to take it further, here is the most traditional tasting method:

1. Put a tiny piece in your mouth, chew it, then stop and allow it to melt.
2. Concentrate on what you feel, and if there is any change in flavour or what your tongue feels over time.
3. Look for flavours:
 - a. Do you recognise them?
 - b. Do they evolve over time?
 - c. Do they interact with each other, or do they seem to come in separate phases? Is one more present and clear than the others, or do they combine?
 - d. Rate their intensity.
4. Do you feel any bitterness, acidity or astringency? Do you find it mild or annoying?
5. A good chocolate has three distinct phases. Try to distinguish them:
 - a. What you feel in the first seconds
 - b. What you feel while it slowly melts
 - c. Now swallow: what do you feel now? This phase is called the 'end of mouth'.
6. Rate it: How would you score it globally out of ten?