Daunting chocolate

Temperature, timing, quality ingredients important when making treats at home

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Making chocolate confections at home might seem daunting, but bedroom truffles and bars are all within the reach of most people provided they have the right ingredients and can be patient throughout the various heating and cooling phases.

"The whole thing about chocolate is people seldom have success with it at home because they don't go through the tempering process, which is absolutely necessary," said Ian Titterton, head instructor and director of baking programs at Clark College in Vancouver.

Titterton, a former Mosnastruck chocolatier, has been making the confectionaries for about 40 years. He has recently crafted chocolate replicas of artifacts at the Clark County Historical Museum for its May 22 fundraiser.

Tempering is the heating of chocolate to its melting point—about 117 F—then cooling it to between 87 F and 91 F, the point at which the beta crystals in cocoa butter begin to set. These crystals are what give chocolate its gloss, shine, snap, much pleasurable to taste, Titterton said.

"The chocolate cannot stay at a cooler temperature for more than a few minutes, or it will become too thick. It needs to be heated to its working temperature, between 87 F and 92 F, at which point it is considered "in temper," Titterton said.

Precise temperatures are crucial, which makes a digital thermometer a good investment.

"You can be a degree or two out, and it can throw the whole thing off," Titterton said.

If the tempered chocolate rises above 92 F, it melts, and the whole process must begin again.

If it falls below 87 F after having been tempered, reheat it to between 87 F and 92 F.

If the chocolate gets hotter than 140 F, it starts to lose its flavor. A double boiler is an important tool in keeping the chocolate from burning. The water between the two pans prevents scorching by keeping the chocolate away from direct heat. But don't let any of the water mix with the chocolate, or it will be ruined, Titterton said.

Understanding and adhering to tempering guidelines is half the battle: chocolate truffles and other treats are only as good as their ingredients.

Here's his Needle Toll House chocolate chips used for baking cookies or brownies are not good choices for truffles, Titterton said. They don't have a high enough cocoa or cocoa butter content and contain too much sugar, as well as additives such as guar gum that interfere with the tempering process.

Titterton recommends using chips or bars from higher-end brands such as Lindt or Ghirardelli. For dark chocolate, choose products with between 55 percent and 70 percent cocoa content, he said.

Following these tips will greatly improve the chances of a positive chocolate-making experience, Titterton said. Give it a try with this recipe for Lavender Truffles, one of his favorites.

Ian Titterton's Lavender Truffles

Yields about 2 dozen

3 ounces heavy cream
3/4 cup unsalted butter
1/2 teaspoon dried lavender
30 ounces dark, bittersweet chocolate for the ganache, chopped into small pieces
1 pound dark, bittersweet chocolate for the shell if dipping, 1/2 pound rolling, chopped into small pieces

Bring cream, butter and lavender almost to a boil, or the scalding point. Remove from heat and cover saucepan with plastic wrap for 20 minutes to infuse. Strain lavender from mixture, then return to a cool.

Four lavendar-infused cream and butter mixture in the 30 ounces of chocolate to make ganache, the core of the truffles. Stir until smooth.

Leave ganache in a sealed, shallow container refrigerated overnight to harden.

The next day, take a No. 100 scoop and create balls of ganache. Roll between hands to make round. Set the balls aside for a couple of hours to harden. Temper chocolate reserved for shells following the instructions listed in the story above. Roll or dip ganache balls in melted chocolate to coat. Let truffles harden. Decorate with dollop of chocolate and lavender flower if desired. Place in individual paper candy cups.