

**Tony Zielinski**

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## **Have a heart: Buy fair trade chocolate this year**

**By BARBARA MINER**

*Posted: Feb. 10, 2007*

My family knows there are two times when, as my daughters say, "Don't mess with Mom."

The first is in the morning. It takes two cups of coffee and 15 minutes of reading the newspaper before am I even minimally ready for conversation.

The second is after dinner. While I pretend to like most desserts, I never feel satisfied unless there are substantial amounts of chocolate involved.

And when the chocolate cupboard is almost bare in our house, as is often the case, my behavior is less than exemplary. More than once, I've stabbed family members with a fork as we all reached for that last bit of chocolate cake. (Luckily, I've never drawn blood.)

Over the years, needless to say, my husband has found the way to my Valentine's Day heart: Buy chocolate. But he's often in a quandary because I also spout about consumer-based holidays that seem designed merely to line the pockets of the greeting card, floral and chocolate industries.

This Valentine's Day, I have the perfect solution: fair trade chocolate.

Before you think I am being overly PC, let me assure you. I'm not one to embrace food campaigns merely because they're the right thing to do.

I staunchly resisted joining food co-ops in the 1960s and 1970s, when you had to volunteer to divide those 50-pound bags of rice into one-pound sacks. And although I probably shouldn't admit it, I've never done a food compost in my life.

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But the beauty of fair trade chocolate is that you can do what's ethically best and you don't have to sacrifice taste. The chocolate's among the best.

Why just yesterday, as research for this article, I was forced to eat a 3.5-ounce "Organic Very Dark Chocolate" bar from Equal Exchange. While perhaps not as "smooth" as, say, a Dove bar, the chocolate's intensity and flavor were unparalleled.

Tastes aside, there are compelling reasons to buy fair trade for Valentine's Day. After all, isn't this holiday all about love?

The most common fair trade certified food in the United States is coffee, which has been available for about 20 years and is now found even in large grocery store chains and national franchises such as Starbucks. While not yet as common, fair trade chocolate is increasingly available.

Fair trade products carry a "Fair Trade Certified" label on the packaging, somewhat akin to the "USDA Organic" label.

TransFair USA, the non-profit group that certifies fair trade products in the United States, has developed an audit system that tracks the goods from the farm to the finished product and verifies compliance with its standards.

The heart of fair trade involves an assurance that small farmers and farm workers are paid a fair price for their product.

Generally, cocoa farmers get only five cents for every dollar spent on chocolate, while middleman trading organizations and the chocolate industry receive about 70%, according to the European Fair Trade Association.

For the small family farms that grow 90% of the world's cocoa, average cocoa revenue in 2002 ranged from \$30 to \$110 per household member. That's one reason all family members, including young children, are often forced into the fields.

But fair trade goes beyond assuring an ethical price. It also involves fair labor conditions, sound environmental practices and direct trade between importers and farmers. One of the biggest concerns involves children and unfair labor practices.

For instance, the Ivory Coast and Ghana are the world's two largest cocoa-producing countries, and cocoa accounts for 40% or more of their export revenue. A 2001 study by the Geneva-based International Labor Organization found that trafficking in child agricultural labor is widespread in West Africa.

While there are signs that the child trafficking has been reduced, other bad practices are still rampant. An estimated 284,000 children work on cocoa farms in West Africa in hazardous tasks such as using machetes and applying pesticides without protective equipment, according to the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, an Africa-based research group.

Many children also work long hours, sacrificing their education. In Ivory Coast, for instance, the institute estimates that 66% of child cocoa workers don't attend school.

Fair trade campaigns have been prominent in Europe, but organizers know they need to make it the

United States - the world's largest chocolate consumer.

One survey, for instance, said that 46% of Americans said they can't live without chocolate. Based on my friends and family, I would have predicted an even higher percentage.

Not surprisingly, church groups are deeply involved in fair trade chocolate, under the modernized marketing campaign of selling "Divine" chocolates.

Two prominent groups are Lutheran World Relief and Catholic Relief Services. In addition to promoting individual gift packages for occasions such as Valentine's Day, they are tapping into the religious school market.

Not only can school fund-raisers sell "Divine" fair trade chocolate, but the schools will receive interactive educational materials for the classroom.

In the Milwaukee area, fair trade chocolate is available at Outpost Natural Foods, Beans & Barley and Whole Foods Market. And, of course, there's always the Web, where fair trade chocolate is only a click away.

Have a heart this Valentine's Day and buy fair trade chocolate. You've nothing to lose but your guilt.

*Barbara Miner is a Milwaukee-based writer.*

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