



The food of Love

What is it about chocolate that makes romantic hearts go pit-a-pat? This weekend, on the eve of St Valentine's Day, a team of top scientists are gathering for a seminar to explore the dark secrets of everyone's favourite food. **Roger Highfield** licks his lips at their findings



Loving confection: from artists such as Pietro Longhi, left, to numerous advertising campaigns, romance has been a constant theme in the marketing of chocolate

Chocolate is sophisticated, scrumptious, soothing and sublime. Some would say that it is sinful. Whatever one's view, it remains one of the most vital ingredients of St Valentine's Day, and this Monday, innumerable boxes of it will be handed over to girlfriends, wives and mistresses. But why? What is it that makes chocolate so romantic? Tomorrow, happily, this question will become the focus of intense scientific debate. A gaggle of physicists, engineers, geneticists and assorted 'ologists will be gathering at the prestigious Royal Institution in London to explain why nothing can say "I love you" like a box of fatty psychoactive food made from the seeds of the *Theobroma cacao* tree. With the backing of the Biscuit, Cake, Chocolate and Confectionery Alliance, the celebrity chef Rick Stein will encourage the assembled boffins to shed light on chocolate's darkest secrets, including why it is the food most commonly craved by women.

Perhaps chocolate provokes "psychopharmacological" reactions in the brain. Perhaps there is a hormone link, since cravings often fluctuate around the menses. Perhaps a combination of these factors can explain why many collapse at the mere thought of a truffle. The relationship between sex and chocolate, as the speakers are aware, dates back thousands of years to when it was first cultivated in the land between the Americas, including what today is Guatemala, Mexico, and Belize. Archaeologists tell us that chocolate was a key part of elite Mayan culture notably at weddings. The Maya even had a special cacao god, according to Dr Sandy Knapp, of the Natural History Museum in London. The Aztecs believed that drinking chocolate would bring wisdom, understanding and energy. Spanish conquistadores were startled to find that Emperor Montezuma consumed 50 cups a day because it was thought to raise more than his consciousness; its aphrodisiac properties would help him

for sex. How could the New World resist such a novelty from the Old? The relationship between love and the confectionery flourished in the 18th century. In 1712, the *Spectator* advised its readers to be careful how they meddled with "Romances, chocolate, novels and the like inflammers." The French chronicler Brillat-Savarin reported in 1825 the "virtues of chocolate" which of course included its aphrodisiac properties. "What is health? It is chocolate!" Chocolate was also Casanova's favourite bedtime drink, according to

Dr Peter Barham of Bristol University, author of a forthcoming book on the science of the kitchen. He will tell tomorrow's meeting how the world's most famous rake believed chocolate gave him stallion-like stamina. Dr Barham believes this energy boost was due to more than calories. Chocolate contains caffeine, but in modest quantities. It also contains methylxanthine and theobromine, both caffeine-like substances. Although they do not act on the brain as strongly as caffeine, they do stimulate heart muscle, boosting the force of contraction and heart rate. Is this how chocolates can make hearts flutter? More provocative is the discovery that chocolate contains a range of "drugs" that can act on the brain, according to Prof John Stein of Oxford University (brother of chairman Rick). "No single one of them is present in particularly high concentrations in chocolate," he says, "but the combination may have an effect. It is

‘Casanova believed chocolate gave him stallion-like stamina in the bedroom’

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