

details

For Valentine's Day, Art in a Candy Box

LINDA DERECTOR IS a little too fond of dark chocolate, which is why she's grateful for the wrapper on her newest chocolate bar: It features a vintage '40s pinup girl, wearing a lacy negligee decorated with rhinestones. "Too pretty to unwrap," says Ms. Derector, a New York real-estate agent. At \$15 a pop, maybe too expensive, too.

Welcome to the world of high-design chocolate. With Valentine's Day—perhaps candy makers' biggest day of the year—just around the corner, chocolate boutiques across the country are dressing up their confections with everything from artsy wrappers to colored cocoa-butter designs. In the process, they're churning out chocolate that qualifies as eye candy.

"Chocolate had never been pretty," says Joseph Schmidt, a San Francisco chocolatier. "That always seemed a tragedy to me." So last year, he added "Mosaic" chocolates to his line of truffles. Mr. Schmidt hand-colors each one in red, yellow and white patterns worthy of a decent necktie. Now they're one of the company's bestsellers—the 15,000 heart-shaped boxes made for Valentine's Day have sold out, he says.

Taking chocolate design inside the box makes sense in an era that exalts presentation, from high-style Christmas wrap to designer playing cards. Plus, it's an easy way for makers to get in on trends: At French chocolate maker Richart, one of the newest boxes of

bonbons features the American flag in a wavy abstract pattern.

A few chocolate makers admit their prime passion isn't chocolate, but design. "Art shouldn't have to hang on the wall," says Maribel Lieberman, a former fashion designer who introduced the pinup-girl chocolates in December at her shop, MarieBelle Chocolates, in New York.

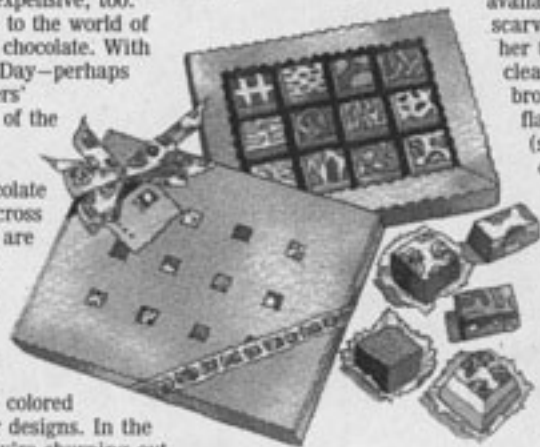
Ms. Lieberman uses fashion technology—silk-screening—to make colorful prints right on her chocolates (\$1.20 each). Most designs are abstract; a handful are recognizable, such as funky boots or cartoon figures. All are available on silk

scarves as well as on her truffles. It isn't clear which is broader: the store's flavor palate (saffron, citron and cardamom) or its color palette (blue, red, lavender, yellow, white, tan and a few shades of green).

But high-design chocolate has a tendency to overshadow everything else in the shop. At Walpole, Mass., chocolatier L.A. Burdick Chocolates, they're especially proud of the

(plain brown) squares infused with flavors such as cumin, lemon pepper, clove and orange. But come Valentine's Day, most people want the store's tiny ganache mice, with almond ears and red satin tails. "They're sweet looking," owner Paula Burdick says. And, she adds after a moment's thought, "Of course, they're delicious, too."

—Pooja Bhatia



Thinking inside the box: Confectioners like San Francisco's Joseph Schmidt are dressing up chocolate with color (here, his 'Mosaic' box).

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