

How do you tell if you're getting good Chocolate?

Firstly - is it real Chocolate?

Not all chocolate is really chocolate. Compound chocolate, also known as cooking chocolate, is not even allowed to be called chocolate in a lot of countries, as it fails to meet that countries definition of chocolate. In Australia, compound chocolate needs to be labelled as such, either "Compound Chocolate", or "Cooking Chocolate", it can't be called simply "Chocolate"

So, what is compound chocolate? Real chocolate uses a combination of Cocoa Solids and Cocoa Butter, whereas in compound chocolate, the Cocoa Butter is replaced with a cheaper alternative, usually a vegetable fat, palm oil or other oil. This makes the product much cheaper as Cocoa Butter is one of the expensive parts of chocolate manufacturing. Not only does this make the chocolate cheaper to buy, it also makes it easier to work with as it doesn't need to be tempered, it's simply melted and used.

But seeing these ingredients should raise a red flag.

No Cocoa Butter makes for an inferior product, it doesn't have that creamy taste, wont melt in the mouth, and leaves a waxy feeling in the mouth after eating (because of the fats).

It's also not as good for you.



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So, first step is to check the ingredients listing. If it says "Vegetable Fat" or another fat, it's a compound chocolate, and you really want a real chocolate. Compound chocolates almost always have an inferior taste and quality when compared to real chocolate. Quality chocolate needs rich cocoa butter on its ingredients list to produce that melt-in-your mouth texture chocolate lovers crave.

As a rule, compound chocolate lacks the depth of flavour you get with real chocolate, and the texture doesn't come close to the silky chocolate texture that melts as soon as it hits your tongue.

Cocoa Percentages – What's in a Number?

While the type and quality of ingredients that go into the chocolate affect the chocolate, the cocoa percentages also come into the mix to affect the flavour of chocolate. This is especially true for dark chocolate.

The cocoa percentage in chocolate measures the total amount of cocoa between the chocolate liquor, cocoa butter and cocoa powder. Whilst a high number in the cocoa percentage column doesn't automatically earn the chocolate a gold star for quality, it's a good indicator.



As the cocoa percentage increases, so does the flavour intensity.

The cocoa percentage of a chocolate does affect the taste, though. As the cocoa percentage increases, the chocolate flavour intensity and darkness also increase, while the sweetness decreases due to lower amounts of sugar added to the chocolate. Quality dark chocolate generally has a minimum of 60 percent cocoa. Chocolate with 80 percent cocoa has a bitter taste and is often better for baking than for eating plain.

Chocolate with a higher cocoa percentage also has more flavonoids, which add to the pigment and offer potential health benefits.

Dark chocolate may offer the following health benefits:

- Potentially lowers blood pressure
- Decreases bad, or LDL, cholesterol levels
- Lowers risk of blood clots
- Increases blood flow throughout the body, including in arteries and in the heart
- Boosts mood thanks to increased serotonin and endorphin levels
- Supplies certain minerals such as magnesium and potassium that are vital to the body's functioning

The Sight Test

Even if you can't determine the details of the chocolate's ingredients, the chocolate can be assessed simply by looking at it. A quality chocolate will have a glossy surface with no blemishes. Well-made chocolates will have minimal or no air bubbles either on the surface or in the chocolate proper.

Chocolate bloom can also be an issue. Bloom appears as white or grey spots on the chocolate's surface, caused by the fats – cocoa butter in real chocolate – making its way to the surface of the chocolate and crystallizing. Bloom often occurs when chocolate is not tempered properly or the chocolate melts after production and hardens again. This can occur during transit if the chocolates aren't kept at the ideal temperature and conditions.

The Sniff Test

Give your chocolate a sniff. Quality chocolate will smell strongly of chocolate. This may seem obvious, but lesser quality chocolates like compound chocolates won't have this strong chocolate smell as the vegetable fat substituting the cocoa butter will overpower the scent of the cocoa. Other smells, such as a frozen or spicy scent, could indicate improper storage. Because chocolate soaks up scents from other items very quickly, if the chocolate has been properly stored then the smell of cocoa will be lowered and these scents in your chocolate potentially lower the quality of the chocolate taste.



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A quality product smells of rich chocolate. The stronger the rich scent of chocolate, the greater the likelihood that you are about to enjoy a piece of high-quality chocolate.

The Hearing Test

No, chocolate won't speak to you. But you can listen to it for an insight into its quality. Grab your chocolate and snap it. Good chocolate will have a clean, crisp and sharp snap when broken. You'll hear it. Milk and white chocolate may bend a little when you snap it because of the sugar and milk content, but you'll still get a strong, clear snap when you break a bit off. Poor chocolate will bend, have a dull sound when broken or simply crumble when you try to break it. This indicates a low-quality chocolate or problems with its manufacture.

The Taste Test

The true test of any food stuff is how it tastes.

This is no different with chocolate. Your taste buds are the best tool you have to evaluate the quality of your chocolate. Taste is important, but so is texture and how quickly the chocolate melts in your mouth.

Compound chocolates have a higher melting point than real chocolates, so if you eat a piece of compound chocolate, you'll most likely need to actually eat it, and it won't have a lovely smooth texture or just melt in your mouth, and you'll feel a light waxy residue left over. High quality chocolate made with real cocoa butter will feel smooth and velvety in your mouth. And because cocoa butter melts at or just below body temperature, if you hold it on your tongue it will quickly melt away, and you won't be left with any waxy residue. A gritty or waxy texture in the chocolate often means the chocolate is either a compound or lesser quality chocolate.

When tasting chocolate, let a small piece melt on your tongue to experience the full depth of the flavour. Note the texture and how the chocolate feels as it melts in your mouth. The taste of quality chocolate won't leave your mouth quickly. Instead, the flavour should linger for several minutes after you finish the piece of chocolate.

