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Channeling chocolate, healthy and in the raw

By Beth Herman, Special to the Sun Journal

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It makes our hearts soar, and all too often our blood sugar. The ubiquitous American chocolate experience is vending machine-generated, often embalming brains and bodies in chemicals and additives such as refined sugar (typically the No. 1 ingredient in popular chocolate bars), milk solids, cocoa processed with alkali, artificial flavors, emulsifiers and other fillers.

In fact, an actual Hershey's chocolate bar contains only 4 to 10 percent chocolate, and even organic chocolate bars generally list raw cane sugar as a primary ingredient. So, to paraphrase actress Clara Peller (made famous in the old Wendy's commercials), where's the chocolate?

For holistic health and nutrition coach Kendall Scott, it was time to find out, and then convey that information to participants at a "raw chocolate" class at The Prep Kitchen in Freeport recently.

Diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma three years ago at age 27, Scott soon jettisoned her rung on the corporate ladder — a previous job required her to juggle unrelenting stress, lack of sleep, fast food and mid-afternoon sugar boosts — for a more balanced approach to work and food. "I soon felt better, even in between chemotherapy treatments," she said of her newfound energy, lifestyle and diet. She eventually pointed her professional compass in the direction of studies at New York's Institute for Integrative Nutrition (associated with SUNY), where she embarked on her current professional path.

Scott told rapt participants, some of whom confessed they needed to corral their bad candy habits, that they could indeed have their chocolate and eat it



Kendra Almy, center, a Farmington Native who lives in Charleston, S.C., Angela Snow, left, of Auburn, and Lacey Cote of Durham add dried cranberries, sunflower seeds and such to their chocolate during the raw chocolate class by Kendall Scott, not pictured.

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too, sans additives that render it into something less than real food. Raw or organic cacao (“That’s cacao, not cocoa,” Scott affirmed) comes from the cacao plant, its health and medicinal properties trumpeted by charismatic characters from Montezuma to French gastronome Brillat-Savarin. Consuming cacao (pronounced kuh-KAH-oh) in raw form with a few healthful mix-ins makes it a gift from which we can all benefit, said Scott.

Samples of the plant’s beans, powder and nibs were passed around and participants were invited to savor the beans, though bitter. Once accustomed to the taste, Scott said, they make a good snack. With caffeine erroneously attributed to chocolate (it’s not there unless added, Scott explained), an inherent, more natural stimulant called theobromine provides a milder lift.

With the preliminaries behind them, participants got down to creating their own versions of raw chocolate bark for the holidays. They began with raw cacao powder, raw melted cacao butter and maple syrup for sweetening (Scott also advocates using honey, agave or brown rice syrup). Next they incorporated a choice of antioxidant-rich goji berries, raisins, almonds, sunflower seeds, shredded coconut or pumpkin seeds, which Scott set out on a pristine bar. Because her husband likes peanut butter cups, Angela Snow of Auburn said she looked forward to preparing the bark at home with the addition of natural peanut butter. Professed candy connoisseurs Lacey Cote of Durham and Kendra Almy of Charleston, S.C., who’d attended high school together in Farmington, worked to fashion something rich, fragrant and healthful that may or may not have made it all the way home.

For healthy hot chocolate, Scott said temperatures above 118 degrees destroy properties of raw products like cacao, so keep the flame low. And for smoothie enthusiasts, she prepared a blended raw chocolate drink with ingredients that included cacao powder, coconut oil, shredded coconut, frozen banana, frozen Maine raspberries picked this summer and rice milk, sweetened to taste. “You can even throw in raw baby spinach to get your greens,” she told the decidedly startled group, promising that once incorporated, it’s undetectable.

With Christmas and that celebrated chocolate circus known as Valentine’s Day on the horizon, the scope of cacao — obtainable at most health food stores or online — may surely know no end.



Dried cranberries, almonds, shredded coconut, goji berries, sunflower seeds and pumpkin seeds are lined up at left for students to add to their raw chocolate. Raw ingredients such as cacao butter, cacao beans and cacao powder are at right.

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Raw chocolate bark made with cacao powder, cacao butter, agave and dried cranberries.

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Raw Chocolate Bark

Ingredients:

(The ratio of cacao powder to cacao butter is 1:1; powder to maple syrup is approximately 3:1 or 4:1)

1/4 cup raw organic cacao powder (4 tablespoons)

1/4 cup raw cacao butter (4 tablespoons)

2-3 tablespoons maple syrup

Any combination of the following: pecans, almonds, walnuts, hazelnuts, sesame seeds, pumpkin seeds, shredded coconut, goji berries, hemp seeds, raisins, dried cranberries (watch for added sugar in this product), natural peanut or almond butter, cinnamon.

Melt cacao butter in heat-safe glass container. Do that by placing the glass container with butter into a pot containing 1 inch of water, on the stove. Heat slowly on low-medium heat to maintain cacao butter's raw properties. You can also microwave.

Once melted, combine cacao butter and powder in mixing bowl and stir well. Add maple syrup and stir until smooth. Add more syrup to taste. Stir in nuts, seeds and dried fruit as desired.

Pour mixture onto parchment paper and let cool to harden. Room should be 75 degrees or cooler, or place chocolate mixture on parchment paper on a cookie sheet in the refrigerator. Once cooled, break into pieces or "bark" and enjoy. Store in the refrigerator. Can be kept frozen for several weeks.

Almond Joy with Cacao

Ingredients:

1/2 cup crushed or sliced raw almonds

1/2 cup raw, unsweetened shredded coconut

1-2 teaspoons raw cacao nibs (cacao powder can be substituted)

1-2 teaspoons maple syrup or natural sweetener

1/4 teaspoon coconut oil, heated

Combine all ingredients in bowl and mix well. Alter any ingredients as desired for more or less sweetness. Spoon into balls. Refrigerate.

Theobromine poisoning

Note for the holidays and other times:

Theobromine, an ingredient in chocolate, while safely consumed by humans, can be harmful and potentially

fatal to dogs and cats and other domestic animals, who metabolize it more slowly than humans. The darker the chocolate — essentially, the more cacao — the higher the concentration of theobromine. The occasional M&M is not a problem for most dogs, but the smaller the dog and the more pure the chocolate, the greater potential for harm. For more information, and a dog toxicity calculator, go to <http://vetmedicine.about.com/cs/nutritiondogs/a/chocolatetoxici.htm>

Origins of chocolate

Believed to have originated in the Amazon area of South America 4,000 years ago, cacao is an evergreen tree that grows from 15 to 40 feet tall in tropical climates. The cacao (*Theobroma cacao* – translation: food of the gods), produces 60 to 70 pods, maturing about six months from bloom. Each pod yields 20 to 40 white seeds or beans, which can be fermented for several days until they develop a brown color and the chocolate flavor. Beans are then dried and shipped to processing plants. Aztecs made a bitter-tasting drink from roasted beans; Incas used the seeds as currency.

Sources: Purdue University Yard & Garden News and Wikipedia

Properties of raw, organic cacao (do not confuse with cocoa, which is processed and not a raw food)

- Contains theobromine, a milder stimulant than caffeine
- Increases energy
- Antioxidant and nutrient-rich
- Supports immune system
- Strengthens cardiovascular system
- Stimulates neurotransmitters in your brain, such as serotonin, to help reduce depression and provide a sense of euphoria or well being
- One of the highest dietary sources of magnesium – vital for healthy cell function
- Good source of iron and calcium
- Considered a mild aphrodisiac

Source:Kendall Scott at www.kendallscottwellness.com

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