

## Tuscany makes some of best chocolate / Artisans of the real Dolce Vita

By DANIELLE PERGAMENT / New York Times News Service

CASCINA, Italy – A few miles from Pisa, in this Tuscan hamlet, is a small gourmet shop where gift boxes covered in cellophane line the shelves, customers scurry in to place orders and the sweet, delicate aroma of home cooking drifts in from the kitchen.

The proprietor, Paul DeBondt, sets out a platter of bite-size pieces on the countertop for sampling and arranges rows and rows of artfully wrapped packages inside the display case. But you won't find dusty bottles of Super Tuscan wines, aging wheels of pecorino or pungent vats of olive oil. That's because DeBondt makes only one thing: chocolate. "You have tastings, you study the quality, you craft the blend," said Mr. DeBondt, whose main shop is in Pisa (Lungarno Pacinotti, 5; +39-050-316-0073). "That's what it means to be an artisan."

Since the 1980s, as the world bought pasta, wine, cheese and prosciutto by the freighter-full from Tuscany, a gastronomical tradition in chocolate has quietly swept through the region. Small factories devoted to shelling, grinding and melting cocoa beans have opened in the triangle from Florence to Pisa to Montecatini, giving rise to some of the purest chocolate in the world and the nickname Chocolate Valley.

"Tuscans are trained to talk about food, to taste food, study food," Mr. DeBondt said. "I'm Dutch, and there's no tradition of food in Holland. There's only a tradition of boiled potatoes. I could never do this there."

And until relatively recently, no one in Tuscany did chocolate. But what was once consigned as a precious treat at Christmas and Easter is now as commonplace as *caffè macchiato*. In the last decade, Italy's annual chocolate consumption has doubled to nearly nine pounds a person.

But this is still Italy; that is, mass production and culinary shortcuts are as welcome as a cup of instant decaf. So despite its exponential rise, chocolate is still made with the meticulous craftsmanship – some might say, mania – that only an artisan can provide.

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