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Chocolate is Valentine's bittersweet surrender

If you're in a mood for romance, open a box today

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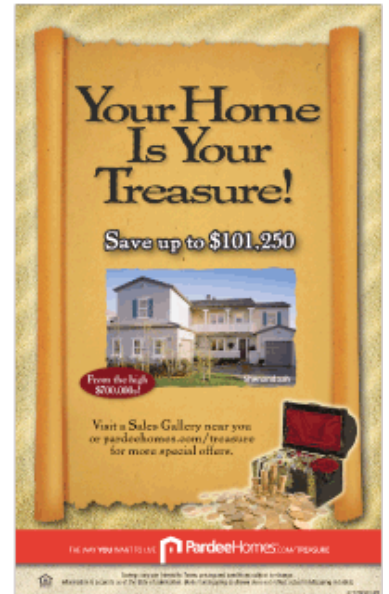
January Jones

Love notes and red roses may convey a certain romance on Valentine's Day, but according to traditional lore- and even medical science- nothing matches the gift of chocolate for its physical and

psychological benefits.

Dark chocolate is full of antioxidants, those beneficial chemicals that have been shown to help prevent heart disease and cancer. While the long-term benefits of consuming chocolate are reason enough to gobble small, regular quantities of the sweet stuff, the short term effect of chocolate as an instant mood-enhancer makes it even more attractive. Chocolate is said to stimulate serotonin, a chemical in the brain that functions as the body's aphrodisiac.

January Jones, a Westlake Village author of the soon to be released book, "Thou Shalt Not Whine . . . The Eleventh Commandment," is an admitted chocolate



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addict. In her book, Jones provides "chocolate cures" and encourages passionate lovers to embark on a "chocolate crusade." Flavonoid-rich dark chocolate promotes blood flow, which leads to romance, Jones says.

Jones says Valentine's Day is the perfect time to take advantage of chocolate's healthful qualities.

"No one ever whines when they eat chocolate," she says.

People often overindulge on food- especially sweets- during the December holiday season, but in January the spigot is turned off as the New Year's diet resolutions begin to take hold. By midFebruary, however, "people are ready to splurge," Jones says.

And splurge they do. Chocolate is a more than an \$11 billion a year industry in the U.S. and many of the purchases come on the days leading up to and after Feb. 14.

Casanova, the 18th century Italian womanizer whose name is synonymous with the art of seduction, apparently used chocolate as a "pre-seduction brew," according to Jones. "It was his drink of choice. . . . "He was no dummy."

Chocolate wasn't always so revered. In the 16th century, Pope Pius V considered the bitter-tasting cocoa liquid so horrid that he declared people could drink it without violating their communion fast.

Valentine's Day was said to have started in the time of the Roman Empire. Feb. 14 was a holiday to honour Juno, the queen of the Roman gods and goddesses. Later, it was acknowledged that the second week of the second month was the time when birds began their mating.

But the tradition of eating chocolate to



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spur romance is definitely not related to birds. Chocolate was harvested by ancient Aztecs, who considered the cocoa bean an aphrodisiac for kings. Some researchers claim that the Aztec king Montezuma drank chocolate throughout the day to heighten his libido.

Today, drinking hot chocolate on a cold winter's night is not only soothing, but good for you.

"Consider it a health drink," said Jones, who also pointed out that according to a study by food scientists at Cornell University, cocoa has about twice the antioxidants of red wine and up to three times those found in green tea.

And Chocolate is not just for desserts only.

Food Network's "Iron Chef America" recently challenged master chefs to come up with five dishes- including main courses- that use chocolate. Chefs prepared appetizers, soups, cocoa-dusted fish and meat dishes and other culinary concoctions that had judges salivating.

Food Network's Chocolate Week also featured a "Chocolate Runway" where pastry chefs had to create garments covered in chocolate. Another chocolate challenge pitted renowned chocolatiers in a contest to build three foot tall chocolate "monuments."

Chocolate clothing and chocolate statues aside, Jones suggests that couples plan a romantic evening based on chocolate and wine tasting, followed by a chocolate massage or body scrub.

"Couples, friends and lovers should enjoy chocolate on a regular basis," Jones says. "It really does work."