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Retail Notebook: Marketers discover it's all in the bean Chocolate attains a pedigree

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Do you know where your chocolate comes from?

The chocolate industry is picking up on the buzz about the importance of marketing product sources by geography and farm origins, following in the footsteps of the wine and coffee industries. And like the premium wine and coffee trades, chocolate is capitalizing on the educated, affluent consumer.

"Like the wine industry, which offers cabernet sauvignon and merlot, chocolate comes in varietals as well.

"It has over 300 components that contribute to its flavor," said Suanne Klahorst, associate director with the California Institute of Food and Agricultural Research.

Klahorst said retailers are beginning to market these differences in their packaging and with consumer education campaigns about the qualities and benefits of chocolate. Key areas for growing cacao beans, which are also coffee-growing regions, include Ecuador, Venezuela, Trinidad, Costa Rica, Ghana, New Guinea and the Ivory Coast.

"Americans are becoming aware that not all chocolates are the same and that those differences are based on where the cacao bean is from," she said.

Christian Wong, owner of two Chocolati Cafes in Green Lake and Greenwood, said his chocolates, hand-mixed in Seattle, are blends from Peru, Switzerland, Belgium and the Ivory Coast.

He expects to sell 20,000 pounds in February.

But many chocolatiers, like Frederick Schilling of Dagoba Organic Chocolates, also are introducing chocolates whose beans are all from one estate, much like coffees from one farm.

He has three single-origin chocolates coming in February, including Pacuare, from Costa Rica.

The variety of chocolate bars now available, though, can be dazzling to the consumer. Joan Steuer, the president of Chocolate Marketing in Beverly Hills, Calif., rattled off different types of chocolate bars in quick succession, "Solid, varietals, single-origin, high-percentage cocoa bars (the newest trend), and, her favorite sweet heat -- a spicier chocolate infused with chili and warm spices."

Steuer, who was the founding editor of Chocolatier magazine, said chocolate manufacturers are bringing limited edition chocolates into their chocolate portfolios to "bring a sense of urgency to the consumer." Hershey's, Godiva, Seattle-based Fran's Chocolates and Dagoba Organic Chocolate (sold in Whole Foods) all have limited edition chocolates for sale now.

"We've done seasonal things before, but this is the first time we have classified something as a limited edition in order to brand and market it," said Sean Seedlock, vice president of marketing for Fran's Chocolates. "We are launching our Brandied Cherries in Dark Chocolate for about a month," just in time for Valentine's Day.

Steuer thinks the chocolate industry is just warming up to the market, as Starbucks paves the way for a host of thick, truffle-type beverages with its launch of Chantico.

Frederick Schilling, the founder, owner and president of Dagoba Organic Chocolate, said, "the American consumer is desiring to be educated on food, and when that shift happens in the mentality of the customer, artisan products get more noticed."

And as for the restrictive food guidelines issued by the Department of Health and Human Services earlier this month, Schilling said, "I don't pay attention to dietary fads. I am sticking to my guns."