

**Belgians have elevated chocolate-making to a fine art. Stores display chocolates like they are precious pieces of jewellery rather than chunks of cocoa crammed with nuts, cream and other goodies**

By Kalpana Sunder

# CHOCOLATE TREASURES



**R**emember Juliette Binoche and her chocolate shop that seduced a village in the movie *Chocolat*? That's how heady I feel when I take a trip through Belgium, the country obsessed with silky smooth pralines, tantalising truffles and decadent dark chocolates.

Once, chocolates were the indulgence of the seriously affluent; it was only in the 19th century, with the advent of large-scale production, that the common man could afford these delicious creations. They say that the personal chef to the Duke of Plessis-Praslin in France watched intently as a pan full of burnt sugar spilled over a bowlful of almonds. The Duke took the fortuitous decision to taste the concoction and was so thrilled that he lent

The Belgian chocolate-making tradition dates back to the 17th century. Chocolates at the Pierre Marcolini chocolatier



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his name to this new confection. That's how the praline came into existence. But it took Belgian chocolatiers centuries to perfect this particular treat. Eventually, the word praline became synonymous with a Belgian confection that features a moulded shell of chocolate filled to the brim with cream.

Cocoa was introduced in Belgium during the Spanish rule in the 17th century. Later, when King Leopold II ruled this lovely country, Belgium's acquisition of the Congo gave them easy access to African cocoa fields. Several slaves worked here, and historians believe

delight to visit not just for the chocolates but also for the history lesson. I was told, for instance, that Neuhaus's wife – dismayed by fine chocolates being sold in a paper cone – invented the ballotin, a deep decorative cardboard box in which chocolates are layered even today. Among their gourmet creations is the exquisite Chocolate Caprice or pralines stuffed with fresh cream, crispy nougat and chocolate.

Grand Sablon in Brussels is a majestic square fringed by gabled houses and the church, the Notre Dame du Sablon, located at one end. The streets lining it have some of the best chocolate shops in



several enticing chocolate flavours on offer like orange blossom, ginger, passion fruit, mango and even Earl grey tea.

Antwerp, though better known for glittering diamonds and religious art, has an interesting chocolate trail. Dominique Persoone ([dominiquelpersoone.be](http://dominiquelpersoone.be)), the city's best chocolatier, has earned the moniker 'shock-o-latier' for his revolutionary creations. His store Chocolate Line, housed in an opulent mansion that once belonged to Belgium's royal family, looks more like a Bond Street jeweller's store and has an open kitchen where you can watch unusual chocolates being created — from those stuffed with black olives and suffused with

rum and cognac, to saffron, curry and wasabi-flavoured ones, which tease and tantalise the senses. If you want to woo your sweetheart, check out his chocolate lipsticks. The *piece de resistance*, however, is a chocolate shooter that offers you a pure coco high.

I also check out chocolates with an interesting twist at Del Rey ([delrey.be](http://delrey.be)) chocolatier, which sells some special diamond-shaped chocolates overflowing with cognac and champagne.

Bruges is a fairytale town of quaint houses, a skein of canals and bridges, and weeping willows with a whiff of chocolate, frites and waffles in the air. Creative confectioners here make tons of the city's



that the history of Belgian chocolates is not that sweet. However, its present is rather delicious.

Every Belgian town has several chocolatiers who elevate chocolate-making to an art form, handling these delicious treats with white gloves and great reverence. I start my chocolate odyssey in Brussels, the genteel capital of Belgium. Jean Neuhaus ([neuhaus.be](http://neuhaus.be)), the inventor of the praline, has the oldest chocolate shop in the city; it opened its doors to European aristocracy in the year 1857.

His flagship store in the elegant mid-19th century Galeries Saint-Hubert arcade, with its covered passageways, is a

the city, like Pierre Marcolini ([marcolini.be](http://marcolini.be)) and Wittamer Café ([wittamer.com](http://wittamer.com)), which look more like Parisian boutiques than chocolate shops.

Wittamer is the grand dame of Belgian chocolate and a supplier to the royal court. Its taupe and fuchsia tearoom, with drop dead crystal chandeliers, is the perfect setting to enjoy delectable ice-creams, pastries and chocolates over a steaming cup of coffee. Paul Wittamer is famous for the exotic confectionary he creates, like a sinful Louis Vuitton shoe made out of chocolate! The chic Marcolini store with fashionable black walls, white polished floors and swish sales staff, has



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:

Dominique Persoone, Antwerp's best chocolatier, experiments with flavours; Neuhaus, Brussels' oldest chocolate shop, is known for Chocolate Caprice;

At Pierre Marcolini chocolatiers, try their orange blossom-flavoured candies; Del Rey sells diamond-shaped chocolates;

The old streets in Brussels are lined by restaurants, coffee shops and chocolatiers





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## THE ESSENTIALS

### WHAT TO BUY

Every traveller to Belgium wants to take back chocolates and the decision of where to buy is invariably difficult. There are large variations in quality, pricing and the variety of chocolates available. There are boutique chocolatiers and national chains. There are also several internationally known brands like Guylian – chocolates made by the husband (Guy) and wife (Lillian) team, who invented the swirled seashell-shaped chocolates. Filled with a hazelnut praline stuffing, they are often termed as the world's favourite Belgian chocolates and are sold in about 100 countries around the world.

Godiva, another big name from the world of Belgian chocolates, has been around since 1926. Their signature gold ballotin boxes and special chocolates make good gifts for your sweetheart. Godiva uses two special production methods to manufacture chocolates in various sizes and shapes: enrobing, which involves coating a formed centre, like rich caramel, with smooth, melted chocolate; and shell-moulding. They also specialise in fresh fruit dipped in chocolate. Visit their Grand Place shop and watch them from their expansive demonstration window as



they dip strawberries or orange slices in a chocolate fountain. Their chocolates often contain hazelnut pralines made from finely ground hazelnuts and sugar.

However, for that true Willy Wonka moment, head to Laurent Gerbaud ([chocolatsgerbaud.be](http://chocolatsgerbaud.be)) in Brussels. Gerbaud marries dried fruits, salted nuts and dark chocolate with spices, a recipe that's influenced by his stint in the Orient. His experimental chocolates have no sugar, butter or artificial flavourings. Instead, they contain combinations like pepper, ginger, pear, apricot, citrus and bergamot.

So, what makes Belgian chocolate so special? For one, Belgians believe in eating chocolates that are handmade and not mass-produced. They use the best ingredients and the chocolate is made by grinding the beans to the minutest microns. The Belgian government keeps strict control over chocolate production, so look for the AMBAO label with the white cocoa bean, which guarantees the freshest, tastiest ingredients — with no vegetable fats or genetically modified additives.

## THE CHOCOLATE TOURS



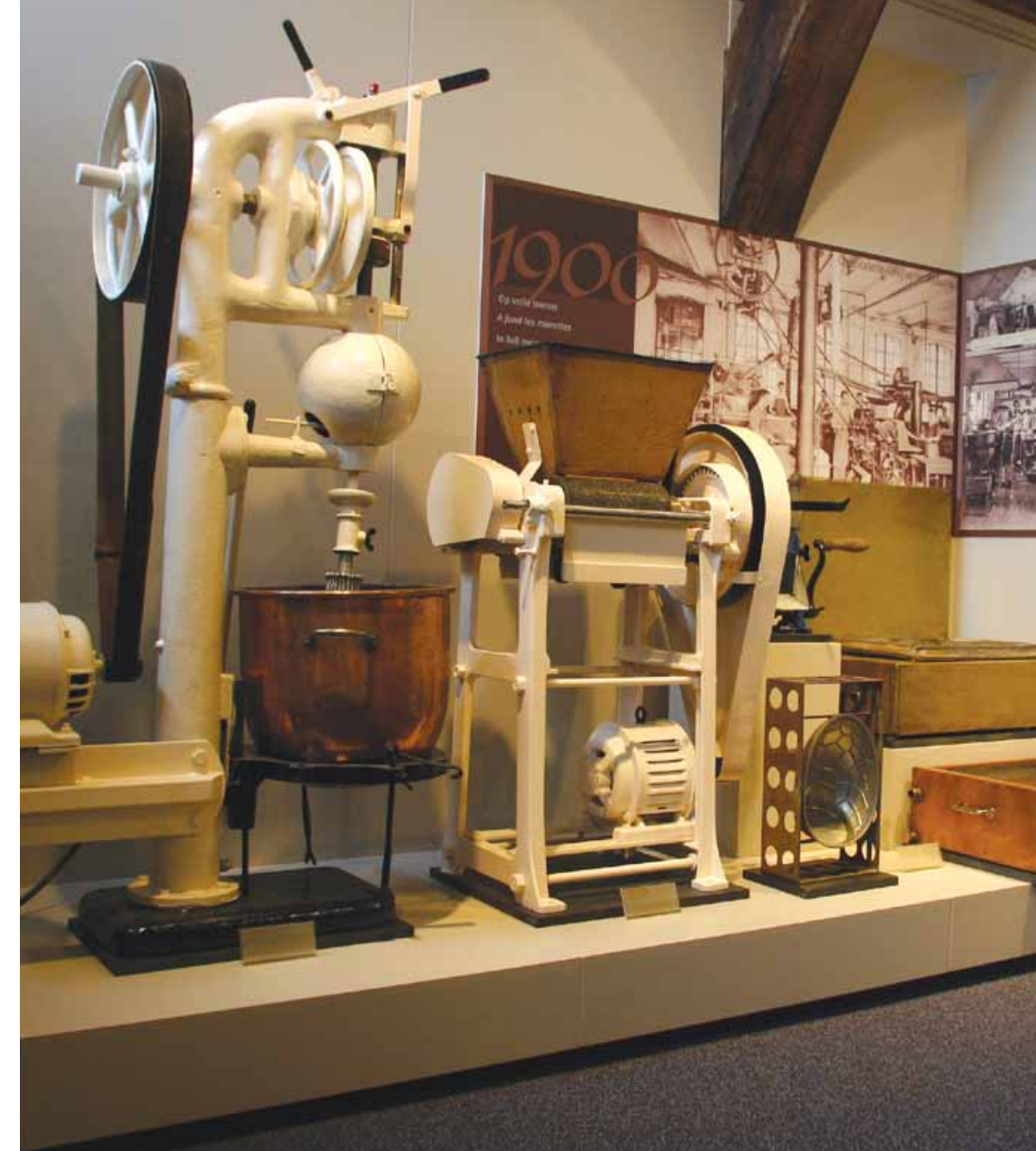
Visiting a Belgian chocolate-maker can be an interesting thing to do on a holiday for the sheer mouthwatering experience of being surrounded by liquid chocolate and nuts and all sorts of fruits.

Within Belgium, each town has its unique chocolate recipe, many of them world-famous praline varieties that have come to define Belgian chocolate. For a quick introduction to Belgian chocolate, we recommend a reservation with Brussels Walks. *The Dark Side of Brussels* tour will take you to premiere chocolate stores in the capital city. (E-mail: [info@brusselwalks.be](mailto:info@brusselwalks.be)).

However, for a more indulgent tour, head to the Chocolate Museum or Musee du Cacao et du Chocolat in Brussels, where you can learn about the Belgian chocolate-making process. You can tour chocolate makers such as Le Chocolatier Manon, whose pralines are handmade, hand-moulded and hand-dipped in their workshop, much like a piece of jewellery. ([salonduchocolat.nl/sdcmanon.htm](http://salonduchocolat.nl/sdcmanon.htm)).

If you are in Belgium in April, drop in at the Chocolate Festival in Bruges, a four day chocolate extravaganza. You can do chocolate trails, walks, tastings and demonstrations. ([visitbelgium.com/belgianbites](http://visitbelgium.com/belgianbites)).

Round off the indulgent experience with *The Ultimate Chocolate Workshop*, an interactive demonstration that focuses on the origin and history of Belgian chocolate. They will also teach you the intricacies of making divine Belgian pralines. The Chocolaterie Duval in Brussels allows you to see the step-by-step creation process. ([visitbelgium.com](http://visitbelgium.com)).



favourite pralines – chocolate swans using almond paste and a kind of spiced flour.

A must-visit for chocoholics is the Choco-Story, the chocolate art museum that charts out the history of chocolate, from the discovery of the heady cocoa bean by the Mayans and Aztecs to the Europeans' introduction of sugar into chocolate and Belgian's chocolate-making techniques. Choco-Story also allows visitors to watch as a chocolatier makes dark and milk chocolate pralines. I walk out of the museum clutching my own praline with the logo of the museum imprinted on it.

I also visit one of the oldest chocolatiers in town — Suckerbuyc ([suckerbuyc.be](http://suckerbuyc.be)). The resident chocolate maker, Kristoff Deryckere, tells me that the store creates its own blends, among

them the ambrosial hot chocolate made with pure melted chocolate. The showstoppers are the edible chocolate boxes with patterns of the local gabled homes. Because there are 52 chocolate shops in Bruges, many more than in any other Belgian town, a two-hour walking and tasting tour of its chocolatiers is offered in the summers.

By the end of my Belgian tryst, I have gained calories, indulged my sweet tooth and I am on a major sugar rush. I now know that chocolate is rich in Vitamin E, which prevents premature ageing, and in antioxidants. And I have heard that popular quote, which chocolatiers in Belgium often repeat, "After eating chocolates you feel god-like, as though you can conquer enemies, lead armies and entice lovers." ❁

**FACING PAGE:** Travel companies offer tours of the famous chocolatiers in Bruges  
**ABOVE:** The chocolate art museum houses ancient chocolate-making machines