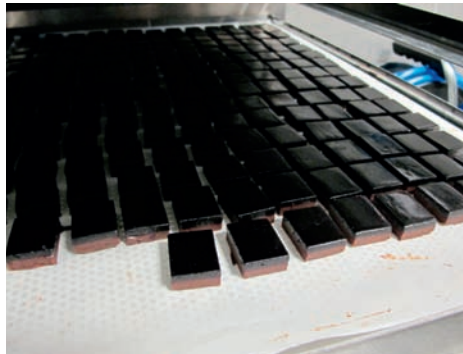


Hot, haute chocolate

By Saxon Henry



Coworth Park, in the English countryside, is a resort where offbeat chocolate creations take center stage



Given the flood of Victorian-era films that have filtered out of the movie industry over the past several decades, you would likely associate English mansion houses with stiffly uniformed butlers, candle-toting scullery maids and horse-drawn carriages piled high with steamer trunks. Though the resolute exterior of the mansion house at Coworth Park (in Ascot, just outside London) has maintained its stalwart gaze upon the estate's surrounding fields for just over three and a quarter centuries, little else reminds one of those bygone days.

The 70-room luxury resort is set within 240 acres of picturesque Berkshire parkland that was originally bought by prosperous East Indian merchant William Shephard in 1776, which is the year the manor house was built. The estate then passed through the ownership of an extensive list of lords and ladies, Galen Weston (the owner of Selfridges and Fortnam and Mason) and Prince Jefri, the brother of the Sultan of Brunei.

Then the Dorchester Collection snapped up the property, bringing the mansion and surrounding property jauntily into the 21st century. Case in point is the focus on trendsetting cuisine by the resort's chef, John Campbell, who has initiated an intensive program reflecting his passion for exploring flavors. The fine-dining restaurant at the resort bears chef Campbell's name, and the staff he's tapped to create his menus have had impressive culinary careers.

Pastry chef Simon Jenkins has been brought on board to foster an avant-garde attitude where the resort's confections are concerned, and he's already put a different spin on one of dessert's most ubiquitous ingredients, chocolate. "With regards to chocolate," he explains, "we have created a presentation board for guests to choose from a selection of petit fours." Though traditional manifestations of chocolate abound on these (and even bedside when the linens are turned down at night), there are plenty of experimental examples to be had, a trend that Jenkins says will continue. "At the moment, we have 'hay chocolate,' made with actual hay, which is bespoke to Coworth Park and made by a man who creates his own chocolate," he explains. "We commissioned him to come up with something based on our natural rural surroundings, and the result is a beautiful milk chocolate married with saffron and tones of hay."

This unique chocolate is the centerpiece of the hay chocolate dessert, which consists of a hay chocolate mousse, saffron jelly, malt puree, chocolate sauce and sour sop sorbet – all topped off with saffron foam. What's coming down the sweeping country lane for the resort's visitors who are eager to try outside-the-candy-box chocolate? "I'm thinking about creating a smoked chocolate," Jenkins says. "I've been inspired by methods of smoking more traditional ingredients like meat, and have been exploring how I can bring that into what I do with chocolate and pastry." If Jenkins puts his mind to it, this will likely be one smoking hot dessert!