

With love, from Zurich

Renowned for its smooth chocolate and stunning cityscapes, the Swiss capital is all about indulgence, **ADAM WHITTAKER** writes.

The Swiss are synonymous with numerous things. Private banking, skiing, neutrality, cuckoo clocks and of course, chocolate. No sooner have you entered the airspace above the mountainous region, little packets of the stuff are being dished out as a form of stereotypical welcome. Like the Belgians, the Swiss are lauded for their abilities with a cocoa bean. However, this isn't entirely justified.

"There's no such thing as Swiss chocolate," argues Neil Davey, author of *The Bluffer's Guide to*

Chocolate, "nor, for that matter, Belgian chocolate. Neither term is an indication of quality as cacao isn't grown or produced in these countries, it's just turned into assorted creations by chocolatiers based there, some of whom are terrible." Some however are excellent, these masters of their craft are not chocolate-makers but instead the conclusers of the finished product, incorporating chocolate from all over the world and covering it with the deliciousness that we take great pleasure in devouring at any given opportunity.

One such is Calogero Giunta, resident chocolatier at, appropriately enough, the chocolate box setting of The Dolder Grand in Zurich, which recently held its inaugural Epicure Festival, a gathering of several of the world's finest multiple Michelin-starred chefs. With its extravagant suites, Japanese and European-influenced spa and 100 works of art adorning every available area of wall space, this impressive resort was renovated in 2008 but originally dates from 1899. The Dolder Grand is the perfect setting for such an exclusive event as it is already home to its own Michelin starred chef, Heiko Nieder, and two on-site restaurants of great repute. The Garden Restaurant offers European-influenced cuisine with, on this particular visit, the squid ink ravioli starter and sliced fillet of veal 'Zurich style' indicative of the exceptional menu. The other, The Restaurant is reputedly the only Michelin-starred venue to boast the aforementioned Giunta - who spends the vast majority of his day deep in the bowels of the hotel in the Dolder's very own chocolate kitchen. Taking time out to chat at length with the creator of some of the finest bite-size delights you are ever likely to experience, the importance of chocolate on the most impressive of menus is accentuated. Each piece itself becomes a work of art soon to be devoured by one of the celebrated guests who have previously included Churchill, Mandela, Einstein and that girl with the dragon tattoo.

Too often, chocolate is seen as one of those comfort treats, an accessory to a celebration or an indulgence associated with occasional pleasure. Yet it's rightful recognition within culinary circles has, although always evident but maybe a little understated, grown considerable momentum. As photographer and author of *Chocolate: A Sweet Indulgence*, Karl Petzke beautifully summarises, "Chocolate symbolises, as does no other food, luxury, comfort, sensuality, gratification and love".



However, there is a suggested playfulness and a sense of humour that is highly appropriate when it comes to this foodstuff. After all, if you can't have fun with chocolate then what can you have fun with? Such associated light heartedness is perfectly articulated by the mercurial Massimo Bottura who I had the honour of hearing wax lyrical about food in general prior to the main event. As he held court before the panoramic views the Dolder's lofty position offers, delighted journalists and fellow chefs alike listened intently as he perfectly enhanced his reputation as one of the celebrities and greatest innovators in the industry. His animated anecdotes, particularly in relation to his 'Oops, I Dropped the Lemon Tart' recipe, were a joy to behold as he held the attention of those gathered. The enigmatic character's latest book, *Never Trust a Skinny Italian Chef* perfectly encapsulates the light-hearted approach that often makes cooking and its science as engaging and approachable as it should be.

Descending from the Dolder into the boutique city by the water, Zurich enjoys a plethora of gastronomical experiences with more than 2000 restaurants within its boundaries. As well as Haus Hiltl, the oldest vegetarian restaurant in the world and also home to the ironic vegetarian butcher's shop, there is the legendary

Kronenhalle, where throughout the years, famous artists such as Picasso and Chagall settled their bills with their work, still proudly displayed throughout the venue. Numerous cafes, such as Café Schober, serve their homemade chocolate and another is the appropriately named Cakefriends. World-renowned Confiserie Sprungli offers such a personalised service that there is a four-week waiting list to get a chance to be educated and enlightened by the manager himself. The sweet toothed can also enjoy the delights of other such confectionery heavyweights including Teuscher, Vollenweider Chocolatier and Honold.


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However, it was the final day of the four-day food festival that held the greatest anticipation as famous chefs prepared and served their own

creations to the gathered guests. Each of these gourmet gurus from all corners of the globe delighted with everything from the exceptional 'shy deer' to lobster, caviar and Wagyu beef. Such a demonstration of their craft was mesmeric and will undoubtedly ensure that this remains a regular event on the international culinary calendar.

Upon departing this famous city, a box of Giunta's handcrafted masterpieces safely stashed, another clichéd preconceived perception had been happily dismissed and a new enlightenment accompanied me. Zurich has worked exceptionally hard to shed the drug-fuelled reputation it had previously been victim of. My expectation of apathy and general disinterest were left behind, replaced by a totally different form of stimulant.

As Davey also concludes in his *Bluffers Guide*, chocolate although often misconceived, represents "an ancient foodstuff with few rivals in its global appeal to people of all cultures, races and religions...and which is more vogueish today than at anytime in its long and illustrious history."

A statement perfectly played out in a city that should be proud of this particular association. 

Epicure 2015 takes place at The Dolder Grand, September 17 – 21.

