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▼ Oregon chocolate festival

It's a Dark Chocolate Job, but Somebody's Gotta Do It

Chocoholics united in celebration of their cocoa obsession at the Ashland Springs Hotel March 5-7. The record-setting 6th annual Oregon Chocolate Festival featured 36 vendors and over 1,600 visitors.

City-wide art exhibits, baking classes, museums and dinners were drenched in chocolate but nothing matched the outright decadence and abundance of the two-day, on-site tastings held in the hotel's ballrooms. Vendors specializing in all things chocolate lined elegant rooms, offering bite after bite of handcrafted delicacies.

There was the unexpected: raw chocolate supplemented with Vitamin D by Jem Raw Chocolates, Chocolate Pear Vodka Sauce by Organic Nation and curry-scented, dark chocolate-covered sesame sticks from Coco & Co. Fine Chocolates. There were evergreen favorites like coconut dream bars by Four & Twenty Blackbirds Bakery, chocolate pastries by Apple Cellar Bakery and fields of flavored truffles by Branson's Chocolates, Silly Rabbit Chocolate Co. and The Chocolate Beagle. Memorably sublime wonders included the deeply satisfying Sel de Mer Caramels by SWEET and the intricately decorated, marshmallow-filled Ukrainian Easter Eggs by Pete's Gourmet Confections.

Eleven Rogue Valley restaurants entered the contest. After much tasting and discussion, the Chocolate Chile Torte with Black Cherry Compote by Brandon Cunningham of Callahan's Lodge south of Ashland was named overall winner. Receiving 89 out of 100 points, the dessert was praised for its simplicity and depth of flavor. The runner-up was Chocolate Hazelnut Mousse Cake with Decorative Sugar & Caramel Sauce from Omar's Restaurant in Ashland.

Winner of Best in Show was a true underdog, previously unknown to the entire judging panel: PremRose Edibles of Creswell, owned by chocolatier Linda Shumate.

"I'm so glad she came," said Karolina Wyszynska, event coordinator and director of sales and marketing at Ashland Springs Hotel. "I kept calling her and telling her she had to be here but she didn't feel she was ready. This should make her very happy!"

Specializing in European-style desserts and chocolates, Coastal Mist of Bandon took the Best Non-Traditional & Innovative Use of Chocolate award for a pyramidal creation called Mother and Child Reunion. Layers of ethereally light cake, chocolate, caramel and cocoa fruit pulp resulted in a refreshing and gorgeous dessert.

Brandon Kirkland's drinking chocolate from Enchanted Florist in Ashland was runner-up in the Innovative category and also took first place in Best Entrepreneurial Venture.

The Best Chocolate Candy award went to Homemade Confections of Medford. This second consecutive win is a nod to the company's delicate, visibly appealing, chocolate-covered toffee.

PremRose Edibles' Raspberry Rose Dark Truffle—a generously sized concoction of meltingly rich chocolate barely flavored with aromatic rose oil and topped with raspberry-infused sugar granules—won Best Truffle.

Zorba's Raw Chocolate in Ashland took Best Bean to Bar Product for its 77% Dark Chocolate (Raw) bar.

After the competitions and two full days of buzzing from chocolate overload, coordinators, vendors, judges and visitors all retreated to their vanilla lives, harboring secret dreams of next year's 7th Annual Oregon Chocolate Festival.

— Jennifer Strange



Baby Talula is wearing BabyLegs leg warmers from B Ella in Ashland.

> BabyLegs leg warmers

Created by a mom back in 2005 to keep her daughter's legs warm while she was diaper free, BabyLegs leg warmers quickly became a leader in children's fashion due to their utility, practicality and stylish appeal. BabyLegs are made of a comfortable, breathable stretch fabric and is great for infants, crawlers, toddlers, or for accessorizing at any age. A parenting essential!