

Sweet tooth? A treat for your sweetheart

If sweetness is your weakness and chocolate is your heart's desire, you must be thinking about Valentine's Day — and just what to create for your "number one." Whether it's for "me, myself and I" or the guy at the gym (or, better yet, with a gem), a gift of homemade chocolate candy will be right on Cupid's target. If love is fickle, it's all the better that this column's Valentine candy is so simple, so good and so easy to make — even at the last minute.

How sweet it is that Celeste Shadbolt loves good chocolate like the rest of us and creates tempting recipes from her kitchen that say "I love you." Shadbolt is the daughter of Mike and Marsh Shadbolt, who operate Cherry Country, a family-run business specializing in organic, dried cherries as well as dried cherry- and fruit-based, dark chocolate candies.

While the orchards and the business are centered in the Eola Hills west of Salem, Celeste recently moved to Portland where she can help the business grow through her culinary as well as public relations skills. After tasting Cherry Country's Triple Cherry and Pistachio Dark Chocolate Bark, I asked her to create a dark-chocolate bark recipe for us

this Valentine's Day as well as answer some questions about making this divine chocolate treat.

Q: I've always wondered, why is it called bark?

A: Because its bumpy surface looks like tree bark. Personally, I like to think of it as a chocolate pizza because it's a delectable way to enjoy a variety of complementary flavors.

Q: I see you use only dark chocolate in your candies. Is there a reason?

A: Dark chocolate is a perfect accompaniment with dried fruit, especially dried cherries. I find that milk chocolate and white chocolate are a bit too sweet.

Q: Do you have a favorite dark chocolate that you like to use?

A: I've done a lot of taste testing — and candy making — with different chocolates, and my parents and I like Guittard the best. Besides the taste, we like the fact that it's the oldest family-run chocolate company in the United States and it's headquartered in San Francisco. (www.guittard.com)

Q: Do you have any tips you could share for making the best Valentine's chocolate bark?



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Celeste Shadbolt of Cherry Country holds her dried cherry bark, a perfect confection for Valentine's Day.

A: Absolutely. While it's an easy candy to make, there are certain things you can do that will turn it from good into *great* candy.

Have everything prepped:

I know you've heard this before, but it's so important. The chocolate cools quickly and you have to be ready. Also, the smaller the topping pieces, the better the bark will taste. That's because you get more of the combined flavors in a bite-size piece of bark. I use culinary scissors — or you can use clean home scissors — to cut up the dried fruit.

Use dry ingredients for toppings: That's why dried fruits, nuts, salts, spices and cocoa nibs are good ingredients to use. I stay away from fresh fruit because of the water it

contains. Water makes chocolate seize or clump, and will quickly ruin a batch of bark or anything you make using melted chocolate. Always keep this in mind and if the unfortunate occurs when you're making bark, whisk in some hot cream and transform it into a delicious chocolate sauce.

Consider the alternatives:

When it comes to toppings, think about interesting combinations to create your own signature candy. Spiced nuts are a great way to bring added flavor and dimension to your bark.

Trader Joe's carries a great assortment of spiced and candied nuts (*various Portland locations; www.traderjoes.com*). My favorites are their spicy almonds, cinnamon almonds and Thai lime cashews.

They also have terrific candied ginger and spiced mango slices — I'd sliver them for the bark. Sea salt is a popular topping, too. My best advice there is that a little goes a long way, so I prefer more coarsely ground sea salt and I sprinkle a few grains for each piece. Meadow on North Mississippi (3731 N. Mississippi Ave.; 503-288-4633; www.atthemeadow.com) has a wonderful variety of sea salts from around the world; some are even colored, which adds a festive touch.

Watch Celeste at 9:30 a.m. Tuesday on "Road Tasted with the Neelys" on the Food Network (Comcast 66); or visit the Country Cherry booth at the Hillsdale Farmers Market. For retail locations, visit www.thecherrycountry.com

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SARA PERRY

TASTE

Valentine's Cherry Cinnamon Bark

Makes about 3/4 pound

In this recipe, Celeste Shadbolt lists her favorite toppings and brands. Feel free to substitute, but remember, for superior flavor, buy the best-quality ingredients possible.

Bark:

- 2 cups chopped into small pieces premium dark chocolate, such as Guittard (5 1/2 to 6 ounces)**
- 1/2 cup premium white chocolate chips, preferably Guittard (3 ounces)**

Toppings:

- 2/3 cup Trader Joe's Cinnamon Almonds**
- 1/2 cup dried tart cherries, preferably Cherry Country brand, cut or chopped into small pieces**
- 1/3 cup dried Bing cherries, preferably Cherry Country brand, cut or chopped into small pieces**

To make bark: Line a baking sheet pan with parchment paper. On the paper, draw an 8-inch square and flip the paper over. Place the chopped dark chocolate in a small heatproof bowl and set in a wide pan or skillet of hot water. Do not let the water touch the chocolate at any time. Set aside for 5 to 7 minutes, stirring 4 or 5 times, until melted. Repeat the same technique with the white chocolate. (You can also use your favorite method of melting chocolate.)

To make topping: Place the almonds in a self-sealing plastic sandwich bag. Using the flat side of a meat tenderizer, crush the almonds into small pieces and dust. Separate the almond pieces from the dust by sifting through a sieve or colander. You should have about 1 tablespoon dust. Place the pieces and the dust in separate bowls. Place the chopped tart and dried cherries in separate bowls.

To assemble: Using an offset spatula, spread two-thirds of the melted dark chocolate over the top of the 8-inch square. Sprinkle the 1 tablespoon almond dust over the dark chocolate and press it into the dark chocolate until no longer visible.

Spread the remaining dark chocolate over the nut layer. Randomly dollop small amounts of the melted white chocolate over the dark chocolate. Using the point of a paring knife, swirl the two chocolates together in a large circular motion, creating a marbled effect. Sprinkle the chopped tart cherries evenly on the bark, followed by the Bing cherries. Sprinkle the almond pieces over the chocolate, tapping the tray on the counter periodically to sink the toppings into the chocolate. Place the tray in the refrigerator for 15 minutes to set. To serve, break into pieces. Best enjoyed within 3 days. (Since the melted chocolate is not tempered, it will not be glossy, and after several days it may appear mottled.)