

Chocolate-Dipped Candies

a recipe from www.maureenabood.com

Choose high quality chocolate—Callebaut, Sharffenberger, Green & Black's, or even a big organic bar from Trader Joe's—and avoid regular chocolate chips; they don't melt well. Choose all sorts of inclusions for dipping; I usually pick three or four to do in one candy-making session, about a cup of each in their own small bowls. Be sure to have everything ready for dipping before tempering the chocolate, so that you can work swiftly once the chocolate is ready. Make as much or as little chocolate as you like, though the more you use, the easier it is to keep the chocolate tempered while you work. The quantity of candies in the end depends on the size of your drops and your inclusions, but a pound of chocolate yields about 3 dozen 1-inch candies.

1 pound semi-sweet chocolate (not chips for cookies), preferably about 60% cacao, finely chopped

For dipping:

Nuts, roasted and salted (peanuts, almonds, pecans, you name it)

Rice Krispies

Marshmallows

Pretzels

Toasted coconut (sweetened or unsweetened; crush the toasted coconut flakes for uniformity)

Dried fruit (cherries, cranberries, raisins, apricots, blueberries, you name it)

Line two sheet pans with waxed paper. Place the nuts and other inclusions each in their own small bowl for dipping, each with their own teaspoon for dipping.

To temper the chocolate:

The chocolate will be slowly and gently melted, then cooled, then slightly heated back up again. There are a few methods to get there; this one is the “seeding” method, where 2/3 of the chocolate is melted and 1/3 reserved and used to cool it down. An instant-read thermometer takes the guess-work out.

Melt the chocolate. This can be done in a double boiler, or in the microwave. Or in a chocolate tempering machine that none of us has. Finely chop the chocolate from a bar or chunk, or use couverture chips (not regular chips used for cookies; couverture is low-moisture chocolate expressly for candy-making).

In the microwave: heat the chocolate in 12-second increments, stirring in between, again and again until the chocolate is melted to 110 degrees in an instant-read thermometer.

In a double boiler, heat an inch or so of water in the bottom of the double boiler. You can make a double boiler by fitting a metal bowl over a sauce pan (the bowl sits high, not deep down in the pan), being certain that the water in the sauce pan below does not touch the bowl. We're steaming the bottom of the bowl. Place 2/3 of the chocolate in the bowl of the double boiler

over low heat. The water should be barely simmering now, over low heat. Melt the chocolate very slowly, stirring occasionally with a heat-proof spatula, until just before it reaches 110 degrees on a chocolate or instant-read thermometer (it will continue to heat, so taking it off before it reaches temperature prevents it from getting too hot, which is important).

Cool the chocolate. Remove the bowl from microwave or the double boiler to begin to cool the chocolate. Wipe the bottom of the bowl right away, making sure that the water never comes into contact with the chocolate; the two are enemies and don't mix. Add a handful of the remaining finely chopped chocolate or chips to the melted chocolate to "seed" the chocolate and assist in cooling it down (and realign the melted chocolate molecules). Be careful not to seed too much once the temp gets into the 80's, or the seeds won't melt and the chocolate may be too lumpy even after the warm up. Keep stirring constantly with the spatula to encourage cooling, and adding the chopped chocolate, taking the temperature until it reaches 84 degrees. This can take 20-30 minutes, which can seem lengthy the first time you do it. Or every time you do it. But it must be done.

Warm the chocolate and keep it warm. In the microwave, warm the chocolate again in 12-second increments, stirring at every interval to even out the chocolate and the temperature, until it reaches 89-90 degrees.

In a double boiler, place the bowl back on the double boiler and heat over low heat until the chocolate warms back up to 89-90 degrees. Remove the bowl from the double boiler, and work with the chocolate quickly while it is at this temperature. If the chocolate cools down too much, place it back in the microwave at 5-second intervals or on the double boiler and heat back to 89 degrees.

Dip in a little piece of parchment or waxed paper. Does the chocolate dry within a minute or two, shiny and hard? If not, take temperature and either warm or cool the chocolate. If so, you're ready to roll.

To dip the chocolates:

Work swiftly to keep the chocolate tempered, at 88-91 degrees throughout this process. Pour about a cup of chocolate over the nuts or other inclusions in one of the small bowls set up earlier. Stir until coated. Using a teaspoon, drop a small quantity (4-5 almonds, for example) onto the waxed paper, arranging the nuts on top of one another to form the piece of candy. Repeat until all of the inclusion is dipped. Repeat this process for each bowl of inclusions, dipping one bowl of inclusions at a time before pouring chocolate into the next bowl.

The chocolate may cool too much and go out of temper (it thickens). Place it back on the double boiler or in the microwave at five-second intervals to bring it back to temperature (88-91 degrees) and continue working.

Place the sheet pans of candies in a cool, dry spot to set up and harden. Box for gifts, or place in little paper cups on a platter or tiered plate stand to serve, extra special.