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TASTING SUPERMARKET COCOA POWDER

Twenty-one Cook's Illustrated members tasted ei

Group, sampling them ee eee eres powders selected from a list of top-selling brands compiled by the Chicago-based market research firm SymphonyIRI

processing Wes provided Oe iiaataenant te cake and chocolate butter cookies and stirred into hot cocoa. An independent lab analyzed pH and fat content. Information on pective cocoa companies. Prices were paid in Boston-area supermarkets and online, and brands appear below in order of preference.

RECOMMENDED

HERSHEY'S Natural Cocoa Unsweetened

Price: \$3.49 for 8 oz (44 cents per oz)

Roasting Style: Nib Fat: | 1.46%

Comments: Our winner |s proof that you needn't look beyond the supermarket baking aisle for great cocoa

Hershey shells the nibs before roasting them and then grinds them very fine for cocoa boasting "assertive" chocolate flavor underlined by hints of "coffee," "orange," and "cinnamon."

DROSTE Cocoa

Price: \$10.50 for 8.8 oz (\$1.19 per oz)

Roasting Style: Nib Fat: 21.80%

Comments: This Dutch-processed import impressed tasters with "round," "bold" flavor and "lots of depth." If it didn't cost nearly three times as much as our winner, it would be an appealing alternative. We'll splurge on it for recipes calling for Dutched cocoa.

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HERSHEY'S Special Dark Cocoa

Price: \$3.49 for 8 oz (44 cents per oz)

Roasting Style: Nib Fat: 12.61%

Comments: A sibling of our winner, this blend of natural and Dutched cocoa tinted cakes and cookies such a deep color that one taster dubbed it "chocolate with a vengeance." But its "pleasant," "fruity" flavor didn't quite live up to the hue.

VALRHONA Cocoa Powder

Price: \$11.99 for 8.82 oz (\$1.36 per oz)

Roasting Style: Proprietary Fat: 21.94%

Comments: This "grown-up" Dutched powder was "dynamite" in cookies, in which lots of butter rounded its "smoky" notes into "pronounced" chocolate flavor. But its smokiness made Jeaner cake taste as though it was "cooked over wood chips."

RECOMMENDED WITH RESERVATIONS

GHIRARDELLI Natural Unsweetened Cocoa

Price: \$5.59 for 10 oz (56 cents per oz)

Roasting Style: Nib Fat: 12.56%

Comments: Despite being nib-roasted, which gave other brands depth and richness, this "mild" powder tasted merely "respectable," with "smooth but undistinguished" flavor.

SCHARFFEN BERGER Unsweetened

Natural Cocoa Powder

Price: \$8.79 for 6 oz (\$1.47 per oz)

Roasting Style: Whole bean Fat: 22.30%

Comments: Tasters who appreciated a lighter-bodied natural cocoa praised this brand for tasting "more milky than bittersweet." But for most of us, it was simply "lacking in rich flavor." Its sky-high price also knocked it down a notch.

NESTLE Toll House Cocoa

Price: \$2.69 for 8 oz (34 cents per 02)

Roasting Style: Whole bean Fat: 12.31% Comments: With "weak" chocolate flavor, this "kid-friendly" natural powder was described as "mild™ and "one-dimensional."

EQUAL EXCHANGE Baking Cocoa

Price: \$7.84 for 8 oz (98 cents per oz)

Roasting Style: Whole bean Fat: | .54%

Comments: Some tasters picked up on "malty" and "cara- mel" notes in this Dutched cocoa, but most agreed that its chocolate flavor "lacked intensity"

and was “almost an after- thought.” Other tasters found it a little “sour” or even “acidic.”

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their methods and, sure enough, uncovered a pattern: The top brands in our lineup separate the nibs before roasting, while lower-ranking brands roast the whole bean, shelling afterward. According to Gregory Ziegler, a chocolate expert and professor of food science at Pennsylvania State University, roasting just the nibs offers a distinct advantage: The nibs roast more evenly outside the shell, making under- or over-roasting less probable. So why wouldn't all chocolatiers shell their beans first? Ziegler thinks it's probably just a bias toward tradition. Other experts we spoke with say money is the real issue. Roasters are extremely expensive, and since many manufacturers are equipped with traditional whole-bean

roasters, they don't often upgrade.

On the Ground

After roasting, the nibs are ground into chocolate liquor (which contains both cocoa solids and cocoa butter); that liquor is then pressed to remove cocoa butter and ground into small particles. With this information in mind, we took a closer look at the

cocoas and realized that some seemed to be ground finer than others—an observation that was confirmed when we put each powder under a microscope. Here again a pattern emerged: In general, our top brands had small, distinct particles, while weaker-tasting powders had much larger particles. Though manufacturers wouldn't disclose the aim of their grind size to us, our finding made sense: The smaller the particle the more surface area that's exposed, hence the more flavor that's released.

Our preferred brands, including our top pick, Hershey's Natural Cocoa Unsweetened, shared these two key features: They were roasted from nibs versus whole beans, and they boasted a smaller particle size. In cookies, cake, and hot cocoa, tasters repeatedly singled out Hershey's “intense,” “bright” chocolate flavor and particularly deep complexity. Even better, this cocoa met our original goal: Not only is it one of the least expensive brands on the market but it's one of the most widely available, too.

We had just one more test before we were satisfied; To see how the Hershey's cocoa measured up

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to the Callebaut, we baked chocolate cakes with each brand and tasted them side by side. Just as it did in our previous tasting, the Callebaut wowed tasters, who swooned for its elegant “dark-chocolate” flavor. But the Hershey's didn't disappoint, earning high marks of its own.

The bottom line: We'll still stock Callebaut for special-occasion baking, but for everyday cocoa needs, Hershey's takes the cake.

Special-Occasion Cocoa

Our winning supermarket cocoa powder from Hershey's is a great everyday option, But we still love the exceptional depth and richness of our pricey, previous favorite from Callebaut (\$16 per pound). We recommend mail-ordering a bag to keep on hand for holiday baking.