A Sweet Tooth's Holiday Gift Guide: Chocolates, Cakes, Cookies, Ice Cream, and Confections

2011 Edition

Edited and Photographed

by *Tina Wong*

Habanero Caramel Crowns from Alma Chocolate

About This Gift Guide & Disclosure

This gift guide is a list and descriptions of each products and its brands/companies that aligns to my website and personal beliefs.

The brands mentioned on this guide and on my website are ***not*** paid or sponsored, and not presented in any particular order of preference. They are all my personal opinons and photographs for your viewing pleasure and consideration to purchase and try or to give as gifts to friends, co-workers and loved ones. Prices listed are approximate, as retailers price according to their own standards and it does not include shipping.

For information as to how to purchase any of the listed items, at the end of each guide's section, there will be a list of sources and stockists.

Happy Browsing and Happy Holidays!

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240 Sweet

240sweet makes artisan marshmallows started by Alexa Lemley and Samantha Aulick in Columbus, Indiana.

They create probably the most extensive flavor list I've ever seen for marshmallows - and the most daring and questionable (I'm looking at you, Beef and Turkey with Sage Dressing marshmallows).

The ones I've had were the **Bourbon Sugar Churro**, which does remind me of a sweet, crunchy churro (think of a skinny donut stick); **Avocado & Lime** was almost creamy from the avocado with a hint of tart lime, and the **Maple Bacon Toffee** was outrageously good (if you're into bacon sweets) that the gooey toffee made the smoky bacon bits sweet enough to make it a confection.

The marshmallows are sold in 3 sizes, prices ranging from $5 to $10.

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The Wandering Eater

Alma Chocolate

This artisan chocolate company from Portland, Oregon stands out from other chocolate artisans are their unusual flavors for their bonbons and caramels, and the painstaking process of making their small icons (seen on the center photo).

These icons are molded solid dark chooclate and hand applied them in edible gold leaf. Prices range from $15 to $45, each are about 3 inches tall.

The **Salted Lavender Caramel** was wonderfully creamy and chewy and not too overwhelming of lavender.

Of the bonbons I had (seen on the bottom photo), **Rosemary Fleur de Lys** (subtle note of rosemary with a creamy ganache filling), **Thai peanut butter cup** (citrus, slightly spicy and great peanut butter filling), **peanut butter cup** (best version I had so far), **Mexican truffle** (initially almondy then transition to a spicy kick), the **Maker's Mark** bonbon (balanced of the said bourbon and chocolate), and the rectangular **pistachio bonbon** (sandwiched with freshly ground pistachio paste along with dark chocolate ganache).

The **habanero caramel crowns** (as seen on the cover) contained silky caramel but as expected, the habanero infusion makes this bonbon quite a sharp, spicy one with floral notes if you get past the heat.

I know I'm missing a couple of flavors but I can vouch that they are all excellent.

Bonbons and caramels are $2.25 each

Tina Wong
The Wandering Eater

Botanical Bakery

These gourmet shortbread cookies are simple. They have but three basic, natural organic ingredients: unbleached hard red wheat flour, European-style butter (over 85% butterfat) and organic cane sugar. After biting into each different cookie, you can taste the purity of its quality ingredients.

These cookies are perfect with a cup of tea, coffee, a glass of wine, and perfectly fine eaten alone. Frankly, I ate one too many packs as I find them terribly addictive. Each flavor is distinctive and balanced.

Available sizes 1 oz., 3.5 oz, 6.5 oz. (latter shown below). Prices range from $2.25 to $12.50 respectively.

Droga Confections

Droga Confections started in 2007 by Michelle Crochet. Her mother started her love of salted Rocky Road (replacing the traditional walnuts with salted peanuts), which is the namesake of her retro inspired confection company.

The **Rebel Rocky Road** (pictured on bottom left is dark chocolate) is made in small batches. It is all-natural, no corn syrup, and free of any chemical additives that you'd normally see when you read an ingredients panel of a commerically made candy.

It is a fantastic Rocky Road I've eaten, as it's a great balance of sweet and salty and the high quality ingredients used in this confection makes a remarkable difference in flavors.

Sold in 2 sizes: 4-piece for $19.80and 12-piece for $28 and comes in milk or dark chocolates.

Caxao Chocolates

Caxao Chocolates, based near San Diego, California, use natural ingredients that have been meticulously chosen with an emphasis on their unique qualities and individual characteristics. They create bonbons that are beautiful and wonderfully balanced flavor.

Prices start at 6-pieces for $15 and up.

Christophe Artisan Chocolates

Christophe Paume, the head chocolatier, is a third-generation French chocolatier, who grew up in his father's pâtisserie in Toulouse, France. After working with his father and attending culinary school over the year, he decided to start this business with his wife Carly in 2009 in Charleston, South Carolina.

When you eat Paume's colorful, hand-painted truffles and chocolate bars, you can taste his love and a bit of soul in his chocolates. Prices start at $18.95 for 9-pieces and up. Chocolate bars are $7.95 and up.

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Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams

I adore Jeni's, who is based out in Columbus, Ohio, for it's creative (almost wacky) flavors and its creamy textures - ice creams or sorbets. For this holiday season, they have two collections - **Splendid Holiday** and **Sublime Holiday** (the latter pictured and eaten).

The Sublime Holiday collection consists of 6 pints of ice creams and sorbets ($70):

The Black Forest is practically a deconstructed black forest cake in ice cream form (my favorite bites were the Italian cherries laced with the pocket of creme fraiche ice cream).

Cumin & Honey Butterscotch Cake was an intriguing spice, curry-like flavors with a kick of sweetness from the cake.

Frankincense & Almond Cake was fresh, fruity, pine-lemon bouquet with delicately sweet, resinous and woody undertones which works with the nutty almond cake.

Smoked Tea & Plum Pudding was personally my favorite of the bunch. The sweet, smoky tea ice cream made this ice cream really special with chewy plums and brandied cake crumbs.

Vanilla Cedar Wood had warm flavors of honey, wood, and amber.

Black Currant Sorbet was incredibly tart and lush with berries. It's texturally smooth and almost creamy. A refreshing break from the rich ice creams.

Photo above: Smoked Tea & Plum Pudding

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Kitty Lee Thomas Sweets

Creates handmade gourmet marshmallows, cookies, and other sweets made in small batches to order in Brooklyn, NY.

The proprietor of this brand, Kristin Lee Godburn, used to be in finance but changed careers to the food world. She attended culinary school and was trained for savory food but making sweets struck her interest, leading her to create these wonderful cubes of fluffy marshmallows.

Her marshmallows are truly fresh (if you accidlentally left them uneaten past day 3, you'll start encountering a less moist marshmallow). It's almost like eating a 2 to 3 bite elegant marshmallow candy cube.

Marshmallows are sold in 2 gift box sizes: the large gift box includes 4 (approx 2 inch) marshmallow is $15, petite gift box includes 4 petite (approx 1.5 inches) marshmallows is $12.

Raincoast Crisps

Lesley Stowe Fine Foods, based in British Columbia, Canada, crank out these rustically elegant crisps.

They have unusual sweet and savory ingredient combinations each crisp. Some of their crisps reads subtly sweeter (e.g. cranberry hazelnut and cinnamon raisin) while some seem more herbaceious or odd (e.g. Salty Date and Almond). Generally, all are great eaten alone or with dips, pâtés, and cheeses.

Lady M Confections

Lady M, located near Madison Avenue in NYC's Upper East Side, holds a special place in my heart as I love their cakes and pastries. They are gorgeous to look at and I adore how these desserts tastes light, perfectly balanced, and not sweet on the palate. If you bring a whole cake or a couple of cake slices to your host/hostess for a holiday dinner, they would invite you back for future dinners.

The **Mirror Caramel** (seen on right, foreground) is a three layer cake - moist, rich, dark chocolate sponge cake with a layer of deep caramel mousse topped with a mirror-like caramel glaze.

The signature **Mille Crêpe Cake** is ethereal, as it's composed of paper thin crêpes with a light schmear of sweetened whipped cream with it's caramelized top.

Strawberry mille feuille is a rectangular slice of puff pastry goodness. Inside this pastry is lined with fresh whipped cream, sponge cake and a thin layer of fresh strawberries. The former two components set together into a light, custard-like filling with a touch of sweet strawberries.

Their individual **mont blanc** is probably my most favorite item to have at Lady M. (It's hard to pick an absolute favorite here.) This elegant chestnut based dessert is like eating a Cognac-spiked chestnut cloud. The marron glacé (candied chestnut) that tops this creation makes it perfect.

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The Wandering Eater

The **green tea mousse cake** (shown on right) is a green tea lover's dream. The total sum of its parts make this cake ethereal yet have a good matcha tea flavor shining through every bite. Fluffy layers of green tea sponge cake, layered with green tea mousse and topped all around with whipped cream and dusted with green tea crumbles. Divine.

Gâteau Nuage (left photo) is the lightest cheesecake I ever ate. This cloud-like cheesecake is a thin layer of crème fraîche to make it delicately different than other cheesecakes with a touch of crunch from the crust.

I admit I never been a banana dessert girl but for Lady M, I'll make an exception. Their **banana mille feuille** has the puff pastry encrusted but inside reveals fresh whipped cream and light sponge cake cradling the sweet bananas without being too cloying. It's sophisticated and an unexpected banana dessert.

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La Maison du Chocolat

As most of you might know, I'm a loyalist for La Maison du Chocolat's bonbons, pastries, and their confections (if I had to count, nearly a decade eating their treats).

This year, their theme is "A Christmas in Paris." Their chocolate coffret collection (seen below) contains 5 original bonbon flavors (**Mi-Figue Mi-Chocolat**: milk chocolate and fig, **Sucré-Salé**: salted caramel enrobed in milk chooclate, **Carré Noir**: pure, silky dark chocolate from Grenada, **Gourmandise**: A mixture of walnut, almond, and hazelnut pralines with dried fruits and woodland honey, and **Boule Champagne**: a wonderful orb of brut Champagne bonbon enrobed in dark chocolate.) and the **Marron Cristal**, candied chestnuts sourced from Turin. (Comes in 3 sizes ranging from 0.61 pounds for $75 to 2.31 pounds for $275.)

The **Petit Mendiant Pendant** (seen above) could be a beautiful, hefty, edible ornament on your Christmas tree. Weighing in at 180 grams (about 6.3 ounces), this solid dark chocolate pendant/ornament is filled with whole, top grade pistachios, pecans, blanched almonds, and hazelnuts, and painted in edible gold.

Pretty to look at but it tastes even better. ($40)

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Kyotofu

I've been a fan of this NYC-based Japanese restaurant/bakery for several years. If you ever go to NYC, head over to Hell's Kitchen, grab a table and have their sophisticated Japanese desserts that are mostly based on soy.

If you don't have the time to stay or not going to NYC, they can ship it to you. As of the past few years, Kyotofu has been running a bakery at the front of its restaurant. They sell an assortment of baked goods, including their famous chocolate soufflé cupcakes.

The holiday assortment box ($25) I have here concisted of a trio of **spiced financiers** (a bit too heavily spiced for my prefrences but lovely moist, buttery texture), a **small tart cherry poundcake**, **mini green tea cupcakes** and **miso choco brownies** (the latter two are my favorites of the bunch; cupcakes were incredibly flavorful of matcha and the brownies are to die for, if you love dense rich brownies).

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Richart Chocolate

The newest concoction from this Parisian chocolate brand is the Micromacs Intense Gourmet. As the name indicates these wee, adorable, colorful French cookies pack a flavorful punch. Flavors range from raspberry, pistachio, salted caramel, vanilla, and the most intense coffee macaron I ate by far. I found out the coffee macaron is a blend of arabicas, including Blue Mountain from Jamaica, explaning the most robust, symphony of coffee I've tasted in one bite.

Prices range from 12 micromacs for $18 to 25 micromacs $45.

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Shortbread House of Edinburgh

This small, family run bakery based in Scotland's historic capital city of Edinburgh.

It is a husband and wife business that started in 1989. They employ a small team of skilled bakers and use the very best quality ingredients.

After eating through a vast variety of their cookies and cakes (edit: I learned that Chelsea Market Baskets does carry the latter despite the fact I did have it shipped from their factory), I can tell you they are sublime - and shockingly inexpensive for its quality.

Their shortbreads are crisp, crumbly, buttery and the flavors are balanced. The ones with dried fruits (like the Festive Shortbread) are spiced with cinnamon and nutmeg, making you think of autumn because it's flavored like mincemeat.

Their Whisky and Dundee cakes were delightful. The Scottish Speydide single malt whisky cake has delicate, moist crumb and the dried raisins and currants that are saturated in said fine spirit. The whisky isn't overwhelming but surely one can taste the spirits flavors combined with the sweet dried fruits.

The Dundee cake, named after the town where marmalade originated. It's made with peels from the marmalade oranges were originally used in this fruit cake recipe and the tops of the cake is decorated with almonds.

Prices (shortbread) range $6.50 to $21.

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Teacake Bake Shop

This bakery makes me quite jealous of the San Francisco area. This bakery, if it were in NYC, would be my second home. They bake with the finest ingredients (e.g. Nielsen-Massey Madagascar Bourbon Vanilla, locally sourced farm fresh dairy and eggs. etc.) and you can taste the love from these cookies.

This **Classic Shortbread box** is a great gift for people who like the classic, crisp buttery cookie in a beautiful tea chest box with some unique touches (Toasted Almond. Key Lime Ginger, Vanilla Bean, and Espresso Chocolate). Textbook perfect textures that would make any gift recipient a happy person. (48 cookies, 1.3 pounds, $44)

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Bacon Me Crazy cookies (left photo) are what my pork-lovin' self dreams of. This cookie was filled with real bacon bits, toffee, and dark Belgian chocolate chunks. Though it is the size of my coaster (about 5 inches in diameter), I cannot eat just one bacon cookie.
12 cookies, 36 oz (2.25lbs) , $48
*Note: It is a seasonal product and was informed it's not available for winter. Sorry, bacon lovers.

The **Mini Treats Deluxe Sampler** (44 cookies, 6 flavors, $40, partially shown on the right photo) are sublmie. What I like about this sampler is the variety of cookies that it gives me leeway to my cookie moods. For example, if I want something chocolate-y, it has their rendition of the Oreo, the **Chocolate Cookie Sandwiches filled with Vanilla Bean Creme.** If want simple but textbook great sugar cookie, I have the **sugar cookie stars.** If I want something tart, there's a coconut sandwich cookie filled with lemon cream. And so forth. This should fulfill the most fastidious cookie eater.

Vosges Haut Chocolat

This Chicago-based chocolate company (it does have two locations in NYC), is founded and owned by chocolatier Katrina Markoff.

I've come to like Vosges chocolates for its unusual flavor pairings with chocolate (e.g. taleggio cheese + chocolate, arguably the first to make bacon + chocolate fashionable and mainstream).

This holiday season, the **Holiday Truffle Collection** (photo on right) in a stunning silver patterened box, consists of these flavors:

Marrone Pistachio – Italian chestnuts with Sicilian pistachios enrobed in 45% cacao deep milk chocolate

Plum Pudding – a firm mixture of plum, Armagnac, and marzipan enrobed in 65% dark chocolate

Peppermint Candy Cane – peppermint candy cane filling enrobed with 65% dark chocolate - refreshingly minty and tempered sweetness from the dark chocolate

Eggnog and Jamaican Rum – Appleton Estate rum, Grenadian nutmeg , ginger , and Dominican Republic white chocolate makes me wish eggnog tastes this good all the time. And I do not like eggnog.

It comes in 2 sizes: 16 pieces for $43 and 32 pieces for $78

The **Hip-Hop Collection** was inspired by hip-hop's culture - "bling." This chocolate truffle collection is made of Krug Champagne white chocolate ganache, enrobed with white chocolate (33% cocoa butter).

This white chocolate truffle lets the Krug's delicate notes shine. The edible gold flakes make each chocolate over the top and possibly appropriate to give to every diva or divo in your life.

9 pieces for $29.

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The **Le Chocolat en Rose** are pink Champagne truffles made of 65% cacao dark chocolate and Piper Heidsieck brut rosè Champagne ganache that's rolled in fragrant rose bud powder. This romantic, lush, rose truffle will enrapture you with textures of roses and flavors of rich dark chocolate. (12 pieces, $39, seen on the right)

For those who are on a smaller budget or looking for stocking stuffers, the **mini exotic chocolate bar library** (nine 0.5-ounce bars, $25, seen with the bird ornament on the bottom right) and their decandent **hot chocolate mixes** (3 different flavors, $15 to $17 each, seen on the bottom left) could make any discerning chocoholic elated.

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Yoku Moku

This Tokyo-based cookie company creates all-natural butter creations that contain no additives, preservatives, or chemicals. Its unusual name came from Chocolatier Noriichi Fujinawa named his company "Yoku Moku" after Jokkmokk, a village in northern Sweden where he first tasted and fell in love with European-style butter cookies over 30 years ago.

This year, Yoku Moku created collectible tins features new annual holiday artwork and contains an assortment of individually wrapped butter-vanilla and shortbread cookies. Each tin includes almond, macadamia, and milk chocolate varieties.

From one of their year-round products, I adore the Cigare cookies. These delicate, buttery-vanilla cookies reminds me of my childhood, as every holiday (or as special treats in between) my parents and relatives gift me with these tins.

Large holiday tin with 50 cookies is 1.75 lbs. ($48); Petite tin with 33 cookies is 1.25 lbs. ($36). Cigare tin 20 cookies ($25).

Tina Wong
The Wandering Eater

Cookies, Cakes, Ice Cream & Confections Sources

240 Sweet
http://240sweet.com/

Alma Chocolate
http://almachocolate.com/

Botanical Bakery
http://www.botanicalbakery.com/

Caxao Chocolates
http://www.caxao.com/

Christophe Artisan Chocolates
http://www.christophechocolatier.com/

Droga Confections
http://www.drogaconfections.com/
Available locally in NYC at Williams-Sonoma

Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams
http://jenisicecreams.com/

Kitty Lee Thomas Sweets*
http://www.kittyleethomassweets.com/

Kyotofu*
http://kyotofu-nyc.com/

Lady M*
http://www.ladymconfections.com/

La Maison du Chocolat*
http://lamaisonduchocolat.com/en/

Raincoast Crisps
http://lesleystowe.com/raincoastcrisps/about/

Richart Chocolates
http://www.richart-chocolates.com/chocolates/

Shortbread House of Edinburgh
http://www.shortbreadhouse.com/

Available at Chelsea Market Baskets (most items), selected items at Willams-Sonoma and Dean & Deluca

Teacake Bake Shop***
http://www.teacakebakeshop.com/

Yoku Moku**
http://www.yokumoku.com/

*Based or have locations in NYC
** Available in upscale department stores like Bergdorf Goodman and Saks Fifth Avenue in NYC.
*** Some flavors/items available at Dean & Deluca locations