

By FLORENCE FABRICANT

UNSWEETENED chocolate for baking and cooking no longer needs to be dull-looking, gritty and inedibly bitter. Like bittersweet and semisweet chocolate, high-quality unsweetened chocolate is now widely available. It has a glossy sheen, a silky texture, a rich fragrance and a complex flavor. All this makes a big difference in the result.

When a recipe calls for unsweetened chocolate, a cook should look for 99 or 100 percent on the label. This score does not represent perfection. It means the bar is pure chocolate, without sugar. These days it can also mean the chocolate has such finesse that it can perhaps be nibbled with an after-dinner black coffee or brandy.

Today, makers of fine chocolates, like Scharffen Berger, Lindt and Ghirardelli, also make unsweetened chocolate for baking. Break off a piece of one of these bars, or of a 100 percent bar from La Maison du Chocolat or Jacques Torres Chocolate Haven, and despite its unalloyed bitterness it is still full of flavor and aroma. It is velvety smooth as it melts on the palate. These attributes will come at a price, as much as \$8 for a three-ounce bar.

The percentage of chocolate listed on the label, which you will not see on a package of inferior chocolate, tells you something about quality, but not the whole story. Other factors, which vary from brand to brand, are the amount of cocoa butter, which affects viscosity; the type of beans and their source; and whether the manufacturer is offering a single origin chocolate, a single estate chocolate, or a blend.

How well the cacao components are processed by refining, or grinding, then conching, a gentle cooking process that can last a few hours or several days, also makes a difference. These procedures improve chocolate's texture and viscosity and give the best brands their suave opulence.

Unsweetened chocolate, which was the first baking chocolate sold in retail stores, is now mostly used in traditional American recipes like the one here for hot fudge sauce or for classic brownies.

Today, more baking recipes call for bittersweet or semisweet chocolate because they were the first bars imported from Europe, some 20 years ago, to attract the attention of pastry chefs, chocolatiers and home cooks. High-quality bittersweet or semisweet chocolate is labeled 60 percent to 80 percent chocolate. Now, even mass-market brands like Nestlé and Hershey's have introduced high-end lines.

Federal regulations make no distinction between bittersweet and semisweet chocolate. In fact, they are interchangeable in many recipes.

Tasting and sniffing various bars are the only ways to determine which chocolate you prefer. But one thing is certain: in recipes that call for more than a smidgen of chocolate, the better the chocolate, the deeper the bow the cook will take.