

Sunset

BEST OF THE WEST

February, 2006

Favorite boxed chocolates **Our taste-test winners** **by Amy Traverso**

Turns out we Westerners are a loyal bunch when it comes to our Valentine's Day sweets — dotting the region are dozens of high-quality chocolatiers, each with a fervent following.

We vetted the best for extra-special treats. After narrowing the field to 13 worthy competitors based on ingredients and technique, we conducted our own tasting, scoring the chocolate's quality, range and balance of flavors, artfulness of packaging, and good value for the price.

A sweet choice: Charles Chocolates

Why: These charming, handcrafted, small-batch sweets by Emeryville, CA, chocolatier Chuck Siegel inspired instant loyalty. Top-quality chocolate is paired in exquisite proportion with flavors such as Earl Grey and peanut praline.

Favorite flavors: Raspberry hearts, bittersweet peanut butterflies

Give them to: Your spouse, your mom, anyone else who deserves some sweet love

Price: \$27 for a ½-pound box (about 21 pieces)

Contact: www.charleschocolates.com or 510/652-4412