

# Chocolate of Choice

As decadent dessert season beckons, chocoholics longing to satisfy their sweet tooth *without* over-indulging can opt for these easy-to-make (and relatively healthful) dark chocolate bars instead.

The recipe comes from Chef Christine Denney at The Oaks at Ojai (oaksspa.com) in California, who credits her daughter-in-law with the inspiration for this simple, customizable dessert. "It was Marcia's idea to create 'personalized' chocolate bars for everyone during the holidays," explains Denney. "We found that they're fun to make, but also quick and easy."

Not only can this sweet snack be whipped up in a flash, it can be altered at will. Denney suggests pecans, pumpkin seeds, dried cranberries and raw coconut for a sweet-savory combination, and tangerine zest, pistachios and dried cherries as a sweeter alternative. "Whichever items people select, they end up with a dessert that includes the three most important food groups: fruits, protein and chocolate!" she says.

To glean ultimate health benefits from this tasty pick-me-up, choose dark chocolate with a cocoa level above 60%, which boasts higher levels of flavanols. Found naturally in cocoa, and part of the flavonoid family, this chemical contains the antioxidant quercetin, which protects cells from free-radical damage. Studies have shown that moderate amounts of dark chocolate may help to prevent diseases associated with oxidative stress, such as heart disease and cancer.

"Next time you're craving a treat, why not make one that's tailored to your taste buds and contains no added sugar or oils?" asks Denney. "It's no wonder these bars have become the resort's favorite and most requested dessert!" —Rachel Kossman

## Personalized Dark Chocolate Bars

Makes 12 pieces

**4 oz. (approx. 1 cup) dark chocolate chunks**

**2 oz. (approx. ½ cup) raw nuts, seeds and dried fruit combination (options: walnuts, cashews, pecans, pistachios, pumpkin seeds, raisins, coconut, dried cranberries, blueberries or mangos)**

**Optional: 1 oz. (approx. ¼ cup) toppings (options: coconut shavings, candied ginger or slivered almonds)**

Chop chocolate into small pieces and place in microwave-safe bowl. Heat in microwave for 30-second intervals, whisking until completely melted. On a parchment paper-lined tray, arrange chosen nuts and fruit close together in a single-layer, 12-inch square. Drizzle melted chocolate on top; smooth with a spatula, pushing in the sides to cover. If desired, sprinkle on toppings. Refrigerate for 30 minutes, then cut into 12 equal pieces.