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February 9th, 2010

The Ethical Valentine: Cruelty-Free Diamonds and Chocolate

By Seánan Forbes

Valentine's Day has us thinking about love and romance, but there's a very unromantic aspect to two of the holiday's most popular gifts: diamonds and chocolate.

"[Diamonds and chocolate] are labor-intensive products that are largely sourced from countries that have high degrees of poverty, with much of the

population living on less than a dollar a day," says E. Benjamin Skinner, author of *A Crime So Monstrous: Face-to-Face With Modern-Day Slavery* (Free Press, 2008). "They are produced through manual labor, and they are produced in countries that have high rates of corruption." Though slavery exists around the globe, [Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index](#) shows that countries that have the most public-sector corruption tend to be those with the highest rates of slavery.

For a sweet product, chocolate has a bitter history of exploitation that stretches as far back as cocoa production. In countries such as Ghana, Ivory Coast and Mali, a sadly common scenario occurs when slave traders con children away from their parents with promises of good wages and safe working conditions. The children are never seen again, and the promised money never arrives. "Consumers should be made aware that, if they are buying chocolate from a company that has not established that a supply chain is slave-labor-free, then the price they are paying is much higher than the price tag," Skinner says.

As for diamonds, the sparkling beauties often have a flawed origin. In some areas, such as Ivory Coast, Liberia and Sierra Leone, slaves are captured to mine diamonds to fund local insurgent groups. "Diamonds in general are sometimes mined with slave labor," says Mary Burke, Ph.D., executive director of the [Project to End Human Trafficking](#). Even children are enslaved — some just "old enough to walk," Burke says.

We can't feel good about celebrating Valentine's Day by inadvertently supporting slavery, so we sought out ethically produced chocolate and gemstones. A few of our favorites include:

Chocolate

- [Ithaca Fine Chocolates](#) was the first American chocolate company to offer fair-trade-certified chocolates, purchased from small-scale farmers. A minimum of 10 percent of profits from soy-free, vegan [Art Bars](#) go to the [Community School of Music and Arts](#) in Ithaca, NY, and the [International Child Art Foundation](#). We suggest the five bars (\$23.50) packaged with a handwritten gift card.
- Give your valentine gift a personal touch with [Sweet Earth Chocolate's](#) build-your-own-assortment option (from \$6.95). Valentine's Day offerings include a bottle of Cabernet paired with chocolates (from \$34.95; availability depends on your state's laws). Sweet Earth, which uses organic and fair-trade chocolate, donates chocolate to organizations that work for sustainability and fair-trade practices. Check out the [blog](#) to read about staffers' 2009 trip to Ghana and Ivory Coast.
- There's more to [Burdick Chocolate](#) than snappy packaging — although we love the classic Houndstooth Collection (\$95 for three tiers of chocolate). Burdick uses fair-trade chocolate from Grenada. Selections include chocolate-dipped dried fruit (from \$10.50), as well as artful [chocolate mice and penguins](#) (from \$2.75) that will bring a smile to your valentine.

Diamonds

- [Brilliant Earth](#) buys ethically produced Canadian diamonds and uses recycled gold, which is better for the environment, since there's no need for mining. Five percent of profits are donated to charities working in Africa to provide medical aid and education and to prevent child labor. And creating a conflict-free ring, from stone to setting, is surprisingly affordable and fun. We chose a 0.36 carat princess-cut diamond and put it in a tapered white-gold setting: \$1,275.
- [Precious Earth Fine Jewelry](#) creates socially responsible and beautiful jewelry, using ethically sourced Namibian diamonds, and is committed to helping local populations achieve financial independence — the surest escape route from slavery.
- At [Leber Jeweler](#), you'll find jewelry made with conflict-free diamonds, fair-trade gemstones, and recycled and reclaimed gold and platinum. Just like conflict diamonds, there is conflict gold coming from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Reclaimed precious metals avoid that possibility — and there's no loss of quality when gold and platinum are reused. A pair of diamond-stud earrings — 1 carat total weight — in a classic platinum setting costs \$2,900.

We were surprised that slave labor is so prevalent, and we believe supporting organizations such as [Free the Slaves](#), [Nomi Network](#) and the [Polaris Project](#) can help with ending human trafficking.

Do you think it's important to seek Valentine's Day gifts that are made in socially responsible ways?

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It's what's inside that counts: Chocolate production has a history of exploiting workers.