Chocolate festival benefits women in college

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SANTA CRUZ — The seventh annual Santa Cruz Chocolate Festival drew a crowd to the Cocoa Nut Grove on Sunday to sample a wide range of recipes that involve the sweet, melt-in-your-mouth candy.

The decadent smell that filled the conference hall was enough to get mouths watering.

From simple milk chocolate bars to dark chocolate-covered nuts and ginger, the festival offered chocolate in every form. Ice cream, hot cocoa, mousse, fondue, martinis and truffles were among the choices provided by the 33 vendors.

There were chocolate-infused barbecue sauce, and of course, chocolate-covered bacon.

“You come to this event because you love chocolate,” said Lorena Zelaya, who throws home tasting parties for Dove Chocolate. “We have tons and tons of chocolate here.”

The festival went far beyond stoking one’s sugar high.

The chocolate affair is a fundraiser by the UC Santa Cruz Women’s Club to provide scholarships to women who are re-enrolling at the university after taking time off. The scholarship money can be used for anything that helps to keep a woman in school, whether that’s helping with rent or childcare, organizer Ann Berry-Kline said.

About 20 women receive scholarships each year, she said. The festival raises up to $20,000 each year, she said.

“Most of them are adults, not kids, coming back to fulfill a passion,” Berry-Kline said. “They’ve been away five or more years. Usually they’ve left to have children or because they can’t afford it anymore. They qualify for scholarships when they have a compelling reason.”

Friends Cory Fong, 27, and Marissa Ramirez, 19, arrived at the festival to satisfy a shared sweet tooth.

Fong said his favorite chocolate is “anything sweet and savory, preferably with nuts.”

Ramirez prefers her chocolate mixed with fruit.

“The milk chocolate with fruit is my favorite,” she said. “We’re here to take this chocolate love of ours to the next level.”