

DARK ATTRACTION

Adventurers in chocolate craft a niche in Chicago

By Bill Daley
Tribune staff reporter

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Chicago has long been known as the candy capital of the world, thanks to large operations such as Brach's, Fannie May and Mars. What may come as a surprise is that the Chicago area is home to many individual chocolatiers, people dedicated to handcrafted bonbons made with artisan chocolate, pushed with flavors exotic or familiar, and shaped to look like works of art.

Just be prepared to pay for the pleasure, \$2 and up for a bite at some places. Increasingly, folks are willing to pony up to the premium chocolate counter.

Sales are up 30 percent over a year ago for the so-called "gourmet" chocolates sold in supermarkets, drugstores and mass-market stores, said Susan Fussell, director of communications for the Chocolate Manufacturers Association, a Vienna, Va.-based trade group. These statistics show growing consumer interest in gourmet chocolate, she said, interest that is bound to also affect those artisans crafting chocolates by hand.

Artisan chocolate is a relatively new sector within the chocolate industry, according to Andrew Garrison Shotts, owner of Garrison Confections in Providence, R.I.

"As pastry chefs have become chocolatiers, bringing their artistic abilities to the art of making chocolate, the entire look and feel of luxury chocolates have changed," he writes in "Making Artisan Chocolates."

Uzma Sharif, chef and owner of Love in Disguise Chocolates Ltd. in Chicago, said the appeal of handmade chocolates is simple.

"People want something more creative that shows what's coming from their hearts," she said. "A lot of my customers want something unique."

More and more chocolatiers like Sharif are seeking to feed the demand, so evident now as Valentine's Day approaches. Most do only chocolates; others sell cookies, cakes and pastries as well. What unites them is a passion for quality you can taste and see, and an innate respect for the mysterious ways of the raw ingredient they're using.

"It's tricky stuff," said Bob Piron, whose 23-year-old company, Belgian Chocolatier Piron of Evanston, could be considered the granddaddy of the region's makers of prestige chocolates. "As soon as you think you understand it, it slaps you in the face and you lose a batch."

Yet, chocolatiers keep plugging away, buoyed by the sense of artistry and creativity given by this ancient food, once favored by the Mayans and Aztecs.

Tastes in chocolate are changing, Chicago chocolatiers say, as Americans develop a more European palate for chocolate. That means less sweet, more intense chocolates.

Cacao is the bean from which chocolate is made. The percentage numbers found increasingly on chocolate wrappers boasts how much pure cacao bean is in that chocolate. The higher the cacao percentage, the more intense is the flavor.

Knowing the cacao numbers is all the rage these days, with consumers seeking out chocolates with percentages ranging from 64, 70, 75, to even 90 percent. Fussell said this is another sign of how consumers want to know more about chocolate.

While cacao affects flavor, the Chocolate Manufacturer's Association noted one can't automatically link the cacao percentage with the amount of flavanols found in a particular piece of chocolate. Flavanols are compounds that researchers believe may lower blood pressure.

Health claims have fueled interest in chocolate. Like green tea and red wine, chocolate is rich in good-for-you antioxidants. Dark chocolate is especially rich in antioxidants, and Chicago-area chocolatiers report a boost in dark-chocolate sales. At Belgian Chocolatier Piron, for example, dark has outsold milk chocolate about 3-to-1 in the last year. In years past the demand was more evenly split, Piron said.

A number of chocolate-makers are seeking to boost the healthful aura in the choice of the other ingredients used in their confections. Sharif, for example, spoke of working "super foods" such as blueberries and pomegranates into her chocolates. And Rieko Wada, owner of Sweet Endeavours in Schaumburg, has even made raspberry bonbons using berries from one of her customer's own raspberry bushes.

Chocolatiers feeding the area's sweet tooth benefit from the city's long candy history, said Matt Hancock, director of the Food and Candy Institute, a non-profit, public-private partnership working to strengthen the food and candy industries in Chicago. But getting the word out about these artisans is important too.

Hancock said many of his friends are surprised to learn that Vosges Haut-Chocolat, a nationally respected maker of gourmet chocolates, was born right here in Chicago rather than, say, San Francisco.

"No one is surprised Hershey's is made in Pennsylvania; we're not as good at promoting

our candy," he said.

Many of Chicago's chocolate artists are going about their work in their own way as they hone their vision and express themselves. Their stories appear on this page.

Brandy truffles

Preparation time: 20 minutes

Chilling time: 30 minutes

Freezing time: 1 hour

Yield: 36 truffles

- This recipe comes from Mary Winslow of Chicago's Chocolate Gourmet, maker of the Ugly Truffles line of chocolate.

Center:

12 ounces milk chocolate, finely chopped

1/3 cup plus 2 tablespoons sweetened condensed milk

1/4 cup brandy

1 tablespoon corn syrup

Coating:

1 pound each: bittersweet chocolate, confectioners' sugar

1. For the center mixture, place the milk chocolate in a bowl over a saucepan of hot water. Stir to melt the chocolate, about 2 minutes. Remove from heat; stir in the remaining ingredients. (Mixture will become temporarily firm.) Cover; chill 30 minutes.
2. Beat mixture with an electric mixer (with a whisk attachment, if you have one) set on low until the mixture comes together and is smooth and silky, about 1 minute. (Be careful not to get any water inside.)
3. Scoop small balls of chocolate onto paper-lined pans with a pastry scoop or teaspoon, or use a piping tool with 1/2-inch plain tip to create oval shapes. Freeze about 1 hour.
4. Meanwhile, for the coating, melt the bittersweet chocolate in a bowl over hot water. Sift sugar into a separate bowl. Remove balls from freezer; dip into the melted chocolate, using two forks. Place truffles in the sugar; toss to coat. Let set 10 minutes; shake truffles in a strainer to remove excess sugar. Refrigerate in an airtight container. Let come to room temperature before serving.

Nutrition information per serving:

177 calories, 40% of calories from fat, 8 g fat, 4 saturated fat, 3 mg cholesterol, 27 g carbohydrates, 2 g protein, 13 mg sodium, 1 g fiber

Uzma Sharif

Love in Disguise Chocolate Ltd.

866-464-9866

<http://www.loveindisguise.com>

Big doings are in store for Uzma Sharif, the chef-owner of Love in Disguise. She is poised to move into a 1,200-square-foot facility at 2010 W. Fulton St. that will nearly triple her space. She's streamlining her collection of truffles, introducing a new line called Cocoa Sutra decorated with the imagery of her ancestral homeland, Pakistan. And she's revamping her Web site, important since a retail space isn't foreseen in her business plan until 2008.

Not bad for an 11-year food-industry veteran out on her own for only two years.

"I'm learning as I go along," she said, smiling. "My biggest lesson is just having patience. I get so excited by new techniques and new tastes."

Sharif clearly brings an energy to her chocolate-making, but then she proudly proclaims there's a little bit of love in everything she makes, hence the company name.

"My life and my passion are in my chocolate," she said. "When I came up with the name, I wanted something that really, really brought that out."

The flavor, texture and appearance of her bonbons are all-important, as one can tell by watching her coat one with plump lashings of melted chocolate until the confection is glossy. She sweats the details, just as you'd expect an instructor in chocolate (at Triton Community College) to do. She works carefully to bring out the artistic touches in her work--even the boxes holding the chocolates are handcrafted.

"Every chocolate has its own beauty," said Sharif, a graduate of Chicago's French Pastry School. Her chocolate-covered almonds, for example, first are caramelized by hand so each nut remains separate. Each is then hand-dipped three times in molten dark bittersweet chocolate and finally coated with extra brute (dark) cocoa powder.

The result is deliciously illusory. You feel like you're eating a candy bar even though you're not. Customers looking to order her chocolate should visit Sharif's Web site or telephone.

Mary Winslow
Chocolate Gourmet
1635 W. Walnut St., 312-850-1051
chocolategourmet.com

Ugly may not be pretty but it sure can be delicious.

Mary Winslow, owner of Chicago's Chocolate Gourmet, makes and sells a line of hand-rolled "Ugly Truffles" with such sassy names as "homely hazelnut," "put your clothes on chocolate," "you suck lemon" and the biggest seller, "oozy boozy caramel," made with a

brandy-laced milk chocolate ganache.

These are not the elegant-looking orbs of perfection found in the windows of fancy chocolate shops, but they seem more Chicagoan for their gutsiness--fitting, given Winslow is a native.

"They're all hand-rolled," she said. "I didn't want them to look perfect."

Still, the flavor of these "ugly" truffles is no less sophisticated. Just consider a new addition to the product range, the "gordito picante." It's a velvety smooth ball of cinnamony Mexican chocolate warmed with chili spices and ground-up corn tortilla. The chili doesn't kick in for a few seconds, allowing the rich chocolate to fill the mouth first. Then the heat enters. At first it's like a gentle tingle but it slowly blooms and lingers as the sweetness of the tortilla unfolds.

Winslow turned to chocolate and cookies (that line is called "Damn Good Cookies") last year to offset the seasonal variability inherent in her 10-year-old cake business, Take the Cake. Chocolate-making is another way for this mother of two teens and self-described obsessive baker to express her creativity.

She said she likes to deliver "good, basic flavors" but at a high level of quality. She also enjoys playing a bit with spicy or salty tastes as long as they're not overwhelming.

Winslow sells her chocolates over the Internet, and customers come to her facility in a warehouse-style building in West Town. The look is bright, clean, modern but warm--sort of postindustrial with a smile. She would like to open a small retail shop at her location someday.

Rieko Wada
Sweet Endeavours
1101 Tower Rd., Schaumburg, 224-653-2700
chocolatines.com

Perhaps it's the surgical masks Chizuko Edgington and Terumi Shimizu wear, but walking into the chocolate production room at Sweet Endeavours in Schaumburg is like entering a hospital operating room. Hairnets and booties must be worn by visitors watching the two women handcraft dozens of little chocolates with an almost lyrical precision.

Owner Rieko Wada would have it no other way. She brings an intensity for perfection to the production of her Chocolatines line. There are 50 flavors in all, and all look like miniature works of art. Just look at the samples in her showroom, which is open to the public. Some are molded into squares, others into circles. Still more are swirled into roses or faceted to look like gemstones or crystals. A few are topped with intricately patterned cocoa-butter appliques while others are adorned with bits of dried fruits and nuts arranged into edible mosaics. Everything is genuine, all-natural, she boasted: "I won't use

any imitations."

Born in Tokyo, Wada came to the United States about 20 years ago intent on earning an MBA degree and then returning to Japan to teach. But fate intervened. She began working as a travel agent to earn money for tuition but found herself drawn increasingly toward food. As a student at the French Pastry School, she loved working with chocolate, partially because of the science involved and the creative ways it can be used.

"And you don't have to have an oven," she added with a smile.

Her background gives Wada unique insight into the chocolate tastes of the region's various ethnic communities, notably the Japanese. Americans like nuts in their chocolate, she said, while the Japanese do not. Americans tend to be vocal in their likes and dislikes; Wada said the Japanese are more accommodating, although they prefer their chocolates to be more traditional and less sweet.

Wada is looking to the future. She's working on her own candy molds, including a rose shape that will allow for three petal layers each made from a different chocolate. She's also open to expanding her business into pastry, such as wedding cakes.

Bob and Fred Piron
Belgian Chocolatier Piron
509-A Main St., Evanston, 847-864-5504
belgchocpiron.com

Credit Bob Piron's Belgian-born father for pushing him in the direction of chocolates. It was the early 1980s, fancy imported chocolates were hot, and young Bob was looking for direction and a career. Taken with his father's directive, he moved to Antwerp for a year and apprenticed himself to a chocolatier.

Bob Piron and his brother, Fred, who co-owns the business, still make many chocolates according to the recipes Bob learned in Belgium--for the focus at Belgian Chocolatier Piron remains squarely fixed on classic European chocolates done the old-fashioned way.

Don't expect to find chichi balls in wild flavors inside the glass-fronted counters. Rather, look for diamond-shaped bites of milk chocolate-hazelnut praline with chopped pecans, rough squares of macadamia nut bark or fingerlike segments of chocolate-covered candied orange peel.

"We stick to our guns," Fred Piron said. "We haven't really felt [competition]. Evanston is growing so much our business just grows from the increased population."

At Christmas, "you work your tail off," added Bob Piron. "You've got 500 pounds of capacity and 1,000 pounds of demand."

Despite a burgundy-colored awning over the store window, the Piron shop is pretty plain.

A Valentine's display is in the window, an assortment of pink molded-plastic chairs are aligned in a row, and a set of shelves holds various products, including a box of Tanzanian chocolate. The focus is all on the illuminated glass-fronted candy display cases.

The Pirons and their staff make the chocolates by hand in the large back room of the store, using 11-pound bars of Callebaut chocolate from Belgium as the raw material. It's time-consuming piecework as they coat molds with chocolate, fill the chocolate shells with various flavors, and put the chocolate bottoms on to hold the fillings in place. This is the way it has been done and will be done.

"There's always a certain amount of curiosity for new things," Bob Piron said. "Trends are just that. People always come back to the classics."

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