

CHOCOLATES AND COCKTAILS

25 YEARS OF LIQUID CENTER WONDERS

by Doc Lawrence



Springtime is a good time to address those recession blues, according to Lecia Duke, who for the past 25 years has gained national fame with her one-of-a-kind liquid center chocolates. She believes it's all about love. "It's a new season," she says, "and with dogwoods and azaleas approaching full bloom, it's time to celebrate with things that are truly delicious."

Duke's home is Fredericksburg, a picturesque city in the fabled Texas Hill Country. The city has strong German influences, and a good portion of the population is Native American. Coexistence and harmony reign here, one of the reasons the city is a top stop-off for tourists. The other is her renowned local chocolate store. Born with an insatiable sweet tooth, I made inquiries about a good candy store when I visited Fredericksburg a few years ago and was directed to Chocolat, Ms. Duke's intimate production headquarters and retail store. I entered a delicious world that harkened to Willy Wonka.

Duke's early years provided few hints that she would become a chocolatier. She began as a magna cum laude-degreed architect successfully pursuing a career in Nashville while always thinking about making chocolates. "I knew that designing buildings and bridges was never going to make me happy," she says, so she decided

Chocolat, the Texas-based company founded by Lecia Duke, took the gourmet chocolate world by storm by becoming the first licensee of this whiskey legend. After completion of the Jack Daniel's liquid center chocolates, Ms. Duke has introduced over 150 other brands of spirits plus legendary wines and has the ability to custom-make chocolates filled with any brand of spirits. Image courtesy of CHOCOLAT, Fredericksburg, Texas.

on a major career change, going home to Fredericksburg to make chocolates. Before really starting, she traveled to Europe to learn the Liqueur Praline process, a unique 200-year-old method and opened shop to rave reviews. What kick-started her success, however, was becoming the first licensee of Jack Daniel's Tennessee Whiskey liquid center chocolates. The combination of Old World process and New World brand fame was the huge hit that launched Chocolat and garnered Lecia Duke the prestigious "Innovator" award from the National Association of Women Business Owners.

Approaching her 25th year in business this April, Duke has made liquid-center chocolates with over 150 storied beverages including legends like Frangelico, Amaretto, Crown Royal, Crème de Menthe, Hennessy Cognac, various Kentucky Bourbons, Tequila and Tennessee Whiskey plus wines of the world including Champagne, Bordeaux, Pinot Noir, Syrah and Port. Her specialty is custom-made spirits and wine liquid center chocolates, making this perhaps the only company in the American marketplace with such capability. Her recent appear-

ance at the National Candy Show in Atlantic City stirred enough buzz to attract producers from the Food Network.

Life with Lecia

Duke enjoys home and work. Being part Cherokee in a city with a rich Native American heritage is, she admits, comforting. She shares a ranch with Nick, a local Native American leader, and both care for their land, the pet buffalo and Valentina, their one good-natured wolf. Duke's daughter Jesse is a third-year student at Colorado State University.

Visitors from the four corners visit Chocolat regularly to observe the handcraft artistry, often contributing to quite a repertoire of anecdotes. "I had a man walk in one day," Duke says, "who told me he had just returned from Israel and had this wonderful Israeli chocolate-orange liqueur hoping that I could make chocolates for him for a full-blown dinner party. We made the liquid center chocolates—they were wonderful—and it was fun."

Another story involved a man wearing a Stetson and a holstered pistol who asked Duke if she could put anything in a chocolate. "Pretty much," she recalls telling him. "I asked what he had in mind, and he said 'sheep dip.' I replied that I didn't think that would be edible, and he explained that Sheep Dip is the name of a rare Single Malt Scotch from Scotland. We made this, of course."

Her chocolates are arguably a confectioner's miracle. "Everything is made with love," says Duke. "This is a happy place to work, and since everything is handmade, there is a personal connection with those who get to enjoy the chocolates. Everything," she adds, "has to be beautiful," a reference to the hands-on process and the original design employed for gift boxes. "I knew that being an architect would be handy someday," she says laughing. "If everything isn't beautiful, it doesn't leave the store."

Spring takes on a little added meaning this year. Budgets are strained and fears grow. Living like a miser is the antithesis of joyful living. Lecia Duke, an All-American example of self-made success advises, "Don't live this way. Time is valuable and we can easily celebrate love by enjoying chocolates and wonderful beverages."

Making someone smile with a box of chocolates is almost too predictable. When the chocolates are filled with a favorite liqueur like Combier, Cointreau or Chambord or spirits like Old Forrester Whiskey or Frida Kahlo Tequila, the reaction is going to be loaded with surprise and lasting gratitude. The amazing array can be seen at www.chocolat-tx.us.

Love, tenderness and gourmet chocolates never go out of style.

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