

Chocolat

by Paulette Dininny
photos by Scott Vallance

The shop called *Chocolat* is about as close to chocolate heaven as you can get. Texans should rightfully add the Fredericksburg confectionery to the list of state superlatives.

Chocolat Quintessential Chocolates Company is the creation of Lecia Duke, a native Texan from the Bay area. The store is in the nearly 100-year-old building at 330 West Main Street where the divine, dark decadence is made by hand.

Duke's specialty is the spirited liquor, liqueur and wine-filled dark chocolate made in the centuries-old European style. Flavors are neither injected nor are they anything like the syrupy cherry-filled, overly sweet candies. Among the other confections also made fresh each day are non-alcohol chocolates filled with Taste of Old San Antonio coffee, pecan-flavored coffee or espresso and fruit nectars.

Imagine popping a dark chocolate candy in your mouth, feeling it begin to melt, and tantalizing your taste buds with complex chocolate flavor; then, as you bite down, a delectable liquid floods your senses. A broad smile of satisfaction quickly spreads across your face.

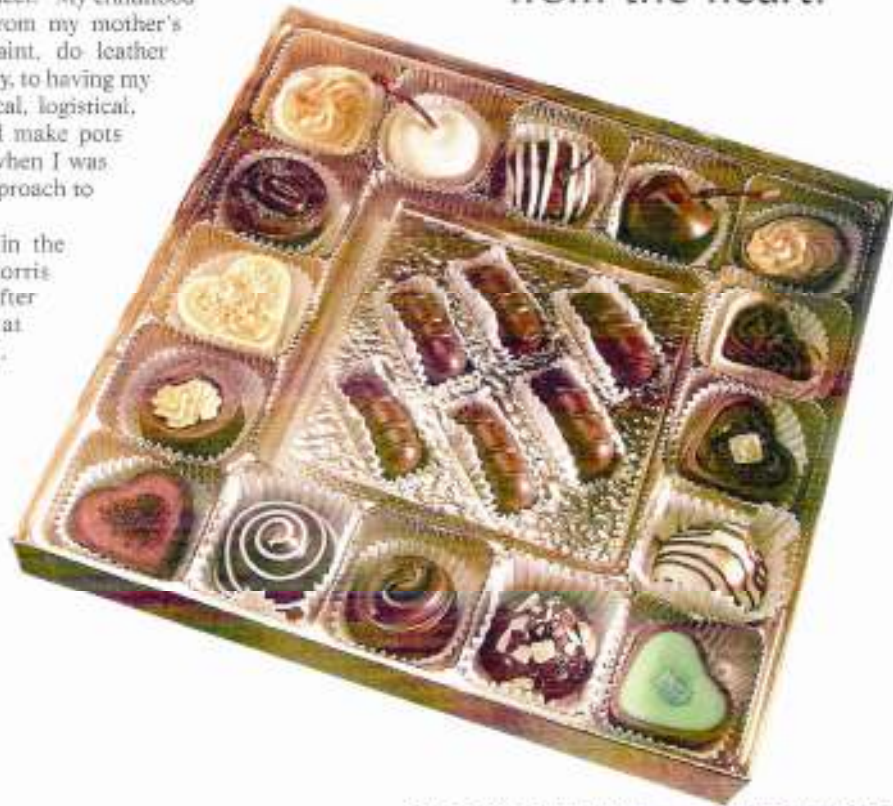
The Back of the Box Story

Lecia Duke was trained as an architect and is the daughter of an artist and engineer. "My childhood experiences ran the gamut from my mother's art studio where I could paint, do leather tooling or make and fire pottery, to having my father teach me the mechanical, logistical, analytical side so that I could make pots and pans out of sheet metal when I was seven. It was an interesting approach to life," says Duke.

She was the only female in the design department of Morris Aubrey where she worked after graduating first in her class at the University of Houston. Eventually Duke moved to Nashville, Tennessee, but

continued on page 20

"The crazy thing is that each box, each piece is a gift from the heart."





kelsy sundheimer



kelly sundheimer

continued from page 19

found that architecture wasn't giving the balance she wanted in her life. It was there that she switched careers.

"I decided to attend the Wilton School of Cake Decorating and Confectionery Art in Chicago. I needed a challenge and something that satisfied my soul," says Duke. "I was always good at cooking and baking. I made candies with Granny, who also taught me a zest for living. The kitchen was the heart of the home and always where I was happiest."

Off she went to Wilton and decided she would "make the best candy possible" and that each piece would be an expression of creativity. "The crazy thing is that each box, each piece is a gift from the heart." Duke, along with colleague Kelly Sundheimer and eight other employees, feel they put their hearts and souls into their chocolates. "We laugh and say that if you have a bad day don't make chocolates. They won't come out right."

The Secret in the Box of Chocolates

After a stint making beautiful and expensive wedding cakes and Carving wood molds for corporate logos of Chocolate, Duke truffles laced with Jack Daniels for a client who really wanted chocolates with the Tennessee whiskey as the liquid centers. Such candy wasn't available in the United States. She was advised that they couldn't be made, in part because of restrictive liquor laws and the laborious process involved.

At that point that Duke contacted Lindt, the Swiss chocolate company, to find out where she could learn the process. She was put in touch with Art Oberholzer, a master chocolatier, who agreed to teach her the dying art. Until a couple of years ago, Duke's company was the only U.S. company producing these confections. She's been turning out the sensational candy since 1984. Two years ago, she returned to her Texas roots, setting up shop in Hill Country.

The three to five-day process involves making indentations in shallow wood racks filled with cornstarch. Liquor, liqueur, wine, coffee or fruit nectar is dropped into the indentations which become the molds. Next comes a light powdering of cornstarch. The cornstarch never becomes part of the final product and acts only as the medium for containing the liquid as it pulls the water molecule out of then filling. Sugar molecules bond to one another forming a fragile, thin wall that encapsulates the liquid. The captured liquid does not leak or seep into the chocolate and, as a result, provides the satisfying "zow" in the final product.

After the crust on the capsules dries, cornstarch is removed by carefully hand dusting. It is then that the thin chocolate coating is added. The liquors are recognizable tastes, but you don't get tiddy as the alcohol content is only 2.6 percent per piece by weight or

Duke's architecture and engineering skills serve her well even now. She designed and built most of her equipment to speed the process. The shop can produce 63,000 pieces a week in the liqueur praline alone. That figure doesn't include the truffles, barks, nut clusters and Collette's Open Truffles also made there.

Inspiration Outside the Box of Chocolates

Ask Lecia Duke what her greatest achievement is, but don't be surprised when the answer isn't creating a successful, unique product. "My daughter Jesse is the most phenomenal person I know. She astounds me, and I say that not because she's mine. She's fabulous by default," she says readily.

"I wouldn't have made it through the ups and downs without her. She was a companion who was always at my side even when she was a little child," she continues. "I think Jesse is an old soul in a



young body. When she was four, she'd answer the phone, "Quintessential Chocolates, how may I help you? She couldn't spell 'Quintessential,' but she knew how to pronounce it. Jesse really inspired me to go on even during the difficult times."

Chocolate Futures

"Science keeps finding new things about chocolate. For instance, it's one of six foods that can lower blood pressure. It contains flavones and makes the blood less sticky. Dark chocolate also releases magnesium in the body, and this can help people sleep better at night.


"I have one 96 year-old customer who buys two cases of the Jack Daniels chocolates at a time. She has one each night, with her doctor's blessing," she says. Sometimes the flavorful treat compensates for the toll dietary restrictions can take on life's pleasures.

"The future holds unlimited potential. It's important to me to grow my company in Texas, which has a more favorable business environment than many other states. The great thing about the confectionery business is that you're not bound by tradition. Anyone can create anything. We created Colettes' Open Truffles. You get more ganache and you can see

the beautiful colors. We're doing pistachio, peach and mint," adds Duke in a tone that suggest other flavors could follow.

A new **liquid-filled chocolate** is one with Tequila Almendrado. She and friends must drive to Mexico to get it. Only one bottle per person is permitted each trip, and recrossing the border is illegal. The new confection is the second best seller after the Sam Houston Kentucky Bourbon chocolates.

"A town resident once admitted that it was her first visit to the shop," says Duke. "It turned out that she had been driving back to **Fredericksburg** from Mexico City, and the border guard asked where she lived. When she told him, he exclaimed it was where the 'coolest, chocolates are made' and that he drives the three and a half hours from the border to buy them." Laughing, Duke says, "I've got border guards doing my marketing for me."

Lecia Duke possessed of a warm heart and a backbone of steel, has never taken the easy or convenient route. This talented Texan will tell you that she searches for "life lived to the edge of all my possibilities." Happily, those possibilities encompass more heavenly flavors to come for chocolate lovers. 

Paulette Dininny is a freelance writer living in Washington, D.C.

Chocolat Quintessential Chocolates
 330 West Main, Fredericksburg, Texas
 830-990-9382 • www.chocolat-tx.us

