

CHOCOLATE MEETS BOOZE; PALATES REJOICE

Twenty-five years ago, Lecia Duke graduated from architecture school and found herself unhappily employed at a large Nashville firm. "I wasn't happy, but I wasn't dumb," she recalls. "And I thought of how happy I had been as a kid, making all kinds of candy with my Grandma, a real southern Southern lady, on Galveston Island."

Duke's memories spurred her to begin making large-scale chocolates for corporate promotions in the shape of whatever customers wanted: buildings, cars, once even a chocolate LP for the famous Country-western singing family, the Judds. When a client asked her to make Jack Daniel-filled chocolates, Duke apprenticed with a Swiss master chocolatier to learn the technique. The resulting confections, "Super-saturated with Jack," she remembers, were a revelation.

In the early '80's, Duke founded the Quintessential Chocolate Company and spent nearly 20 years wholesaling liquid-center chocolates from her West Coast base in Seattle. A move to Fredericksburg in the mid-'90s prompted her to open Chocolat, a retail store in a quirky old building on Main Street. Before long, she was partnering with local distilleries and vineyards to produce exquisite, sometimes private-issue, liqueur-filled chocolates.

"When we began making liquid-center chocolates with

—this killer, potent, vibrant, fresh liqueur—the company went nuts and so did we," Duke says. "Within three weeks we had the chocolates out on the market, packaged and ready to go."

Next inspiration: cabernet sauvignon chocolates using local wine from Becker Vineyards in Stonewall, Texas.

Orders for both products followed from Whole Foods, as well as Duke's growing fan base. "People come in here saying 'I have my orange liqueur, now I need the chocolates to go with it. That's not too much, is it?' And I say, 'that sounds wonderful. May I join you?'"

For those customers unfamiliar with liquid-center chocolates, Duke offers the following instructions: "Slow down. Put the chocolate in your mouth. Allow the cocoa butter to release its 583 flavors. Then it will burst and flood your mouth with liquor."

The result? "Boyfriends can become expendable," Duke admits.

You've been warned.

Order liquid-center chocolates—filled with everything from Kentucky bourbon to Texas wine to Mexican tequila—from the Quintessential Chocolates Company, online at liquidchocolates.com, or buy retail at Whole Foods, or at Chocolat, 330 W. Main St., Fredericksburg, 830-990-9382.

