

# LOVE, CHOCOLATES AND JACK

by Doc Lawrence

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 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 for Willy Wonka.

Lecia 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 said, so she decided 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, Ms. 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 a capability. Her recent appearance at the National Candy Show in Atlantic City stirred enough buzz to attract producers from the Food Network.

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. Ms. Duke's daughter Jesse is a third-year student at Colorado State University.



**Lecia Duke, Chocolatier**

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," Ms. Duke said, "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 man wearing a Stetson and a holstered pistol who asked Duke if she could put anything in a chocolate. "Pretty much," she recalled 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."

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Her chocolates are arguably a confectioner's miracle. "Everything is made with love," says Ms. Duke. "This is a happy place to work and since everything is hand made, there is a personal connection with those who get to enjoy the chocolates. Everything," she added, "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 said laughing. "If everything isn't beautiful, it doesn't leave the store."

Valentine's Day takes on a little added meaning this year. Budgets are strained and fears grow. Living like a miser is the antithesis of joyful living. Leclia Duke, an All-American example of self-made success advises, "don't live this way. Time is valuable and we can easily celebrate love."

Make someone smile with a box of chocolates, a dozen red roses, a bottle of French Saint-Amour red wine and an intimate dinner.

Love is a cost-effective cure all. Tenderness and gourmet chocolates never go out of style.



Veteran journalist **Doc Lawrence** has joined the *ByTheSeaFuture* team as a regular columnist, a relationship loaded with promise and one that is almost certain to entertain our readers.

Doc was a familiar face in Lauderdale-By-The-Sea while he was editor and publisher of a national newspaper headquartered in Broward. He has since resumed writing about Florida and the South, particularly regarding travel, tourism, outdoor life, wine, fine dining and the arts. "I truly love this wonderful community," Doc said, "and this gives me a chance to renew acquaintances and share a few stories. This publication-it's owners and staff-consistently displays excellence and high standards that benefit all of us. I am proud of our association." Learn more about Doc by visiting [DocsNews.com](http://DocsNews.com).