

## Sweet Indulgence

If you think you know what you're getting into when you bite into a piece of chocolate, a stop at Chocolat might just teach you something. Popping the candy in your mouth, the experience is at first like any other - rich, delicious chocolate slowly coating your taste buds. But bite down, and suddenly, the explosion hits; a sweet crunch of crystallized sugar, followed by a rush of warm liquid-liquor, wine, coffee or fruit nectar, depending on your pick. As the flavors combine and the concoction makes its way to your tummy, you realize that chocolate as you know it has changed - for the better.

If the concept of a chocolate filled with sugar-encased liquid seems foreign, that's because it is. When Lecia Duke started her company, Quintessential Chocolates, in 1984, she was one of the first to bring this time honored European practice to America.

"I saw it as a dying art," she says. "I didn't want to see it completely die off."

She worked with a Swiss master chocolatier to learn the delicate process required to handcraft each chocolate.

Then, drawing on her background in architecture and design, she adapted the 185-year-old technique, allowing her company to eventually produce approximately 3,000 chocolates a day while still maintaining the integrity of the European tradition.

In 2002 Quintessential Chocolates moved into a historic home in downtown Fredericksburg dubbing its new production and retail space Chocolat. On the first floor, you can witness the mesmerizing journey of the liquid-filled capsules as they're coated in luxuriant chocolate, then begin the difficult task of choosing which flavor you want to sample. Will it be the Tequila Almendrado, filled with tequila that Lecia buys in Mexico? Or perhaps one filled with wine from a local vineyard? The choice may seem agonizing, but one bite, and you realize all that fretting was in vain - there's no way you'll ever be able to eat just one.



In the old-fashioned technique of liqueur-praliné, cornstarch molds are filled with liquid, causing a sugar crust to form around the fluid. The cornstarch is then removed, and the liquid-filled capsules are covered with rich, dark chocolate.