

Sweet Success

Three Chocolatiers Make the Best Around

Good news for chocolate lovers everywhere: during a 2004 National Public Radio interview the director of San Francisco's Center of Culinary Development said, "People are wanting, demanding and searching for higher qualities of chocolate, in the same way that they're looking for higher qualities of olive oil, sugar or salt." To answer this call, confectioners throughout America raised the bar (no pun intended) on the quality of chocolate they offered. In Southern Vermont, where cosmopolitan trends are thought to elude us, three outstanding chocolatiers have made high quality chocolate available to their customers for over thirty years.

Nick Monte owns and operates the Village Peddler, with locations in Bennington and East Arlington. Walk in-

side the historic Bennington store and you're immediately drawn to the sweet smell of chocolate even though the white walls are lined with shelves of all kinds of colorful sweets and sundries. The rich, chocolatey smell comes from the real treats that are displayed behind the shop's glass cases—trays of homemade fudge in 47 flavors, truffles, chocolate butter creams and, my personal favorite, Monte's signature chocolate bars.

Monte's education in chocolate began thirty-two years ago, when Monte and his wife, Denise, came to Vermont to start a new life. Prior to the move, he was in the supermarket business in Connecticut and not happy about it. The couple often visited Vermont for vacation and Monte thought, "If all



Nick Monte's education in chocolate began 32 years ago

my aches and pains go away when I cross the border, why not stay?" The Monte's purchased a general store in Arlington and that's when they first had the idea to sell fudge. "We had a country store, so it seemed the thing to do," he says. "Plus I love cooking and creating new things."

Once the store's fudge became popular, customers asked if Monte could make chocolate bunnies for Easter. The request prompted him to attend industry trade shows and semi-

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nars, where one of the topics was tempering—a method of carefully heating and cooling chocolate. "They might as well have been speaking in Greek," he says. "I thought, what the heck is tempering?" He returned home and attempted to make an Easter Bunny, but the chocolate came out white and foggy, like a Hershey bar that melts in the car and is later placed in the refrigerator for recovery.

"I can't tell you the amount of chocolate I threw away. Back then I



Working in the Mother Myrick kitchens, Rosemary Temple puts the finishing touch on a tray of chocolate covered cherries

had no idea what I was doing. I had to use a lot of trial and error,” he says. Monte credits the industry organization, Retail Confectioners International (RCI) for his chocolate education. “The people in RCI are so helpful and open. Nothing’s really a secret. I saw how other confectioners were making and developing candy and then I’d go home and put my own spin on things.”

Monte has come a long way since those early days. He clearly enjoys creating new mouth-watering concoctions like his signature Monte bar—milk chocolate with a peanut butter fudge center that also includes Rice Krispies, caramel and marshmallow. Similar fudge-centered bars abound, including Death by Chocolate and Death by Peanut Butter. The truffles too. “A Swiss pastry-chef who specialized in truffles taught me how to make them. He said it’s not a truffle unless it’s round, but I make square truffles anyway.” Never mind the shape, his black and white truffle is one of the best I ever tasted.

Most of the Village Peddler’s chocolates are made fresh behind the counter and in a small back room

kitchen at the Bennington shop. There is a cooking kettle for caramels and machines designed for blending and tempering the chocolate. Like most candy makers, Monte orders the chocolate he works with in bulk—in 50 pound boxes, a mental image to boggle the mind of any chocoholic. The bars inside are divided into enormous 10 pound slabs. Monte blends the chocolate to give it its own unique flavor, but never with additives or preservatives. “I took a course on increasing the shelf life of chocolate by adding a lot of unnatural ingredients, but I decided I wasn’t going to do it. I didn’t like how it made my candy taste,” he says. Instead, he makes batches of chocolate only as he needs them. When the store runs out of a particular candy, he simply makes more.

Ron Mancini of Manchester’s Mother Myrick’s Confectionary is equally committed to offering his customers the freshest and finest chocolates possible. All of Mother Myrick’s candies are made in a large warehouse in Manchester, where Mancini and a staff of five employees make, box and pack the chocolate for delivery. In the

company candy kitchen they also make fudge, caramels, peanut and lemon almond brittle and Mother Myrick’s famous buttercrunch.

Like Monte, Ron Mancini moved to Vermont in the seventies looking for a fresh start. He opened a fudge stop on Main Street, where the Manchester Country Store resides today, and sought the advice of a retired confectioner to learn more about candy making. When I ask the ex-insurance agent what prompted his interest in chocolate he says, “I have a great appreciation for things that taste great, and I’m also fascinated by the science of making chocolate. It’s the combination of science and art that produces a great product, and I’m always looking to improve upon it.”

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Hum-m-m... wonder if a Mother Myrick double chocolate truffle with smooth dark chocolate center and double-coated in milk and dark chocolates is science or art. In any case, Mancini continues to learn new techniques and experiment with unusual infusions and flavors for his chocolates. This year, look for a new truffle line that will include nuances of teas and spices.

For Mancini, flavor and texture

are important to good chocolate, but it's the cocoa butter that makes magic happen. "The cocoa butter in chocolate carries the chocolate's flavor to your palette without leaving its own mark," he says. When seeking out good chocolate, Mancini tells me it's also important to consider the amount of cocoa mass it contains (75% or higher), the dairy product used and the quality of the vanilla.

While most chocolate lovers agree that taste is the main thing that drives them to their favorite confectionary, there's no denying that the experience of the shop is also important. The Chocolate Barn in Shaftsbury offers both an inviting atmosphere and delicious chocolate. Housed inside a 19th century barn, the chocolate and antiques shop is a feast for the senses. There's almost always a line at the counter, but that just gives you time to consider all of

Where to find them:

Village Chocolate Shoppe
471 Main Street
Bennington

Village Peddler
261 Old Mill Road
East Arlington
1-800-AH-FUDGE
www.villagepeddlervt.com

Mother Myrick's Confectionary
Route 7A
Manchester Center
1-888-669-7425
www.mothermyricks.com

The Chocolate Barn
Route 7A
Shaftsbury
375-6926

the shop's many offerings. Owner Lucinda Gregory has stocked the bins with over 65 varieties of hand-dipped chocolates, such as my first choice: dark chocolate-covered marshmallows. You'll also find truffles, traditional homemade fudge, chocolate butter creams and the specialty of the house, molded chocolates.

Gregory's chocolates are not made in your run of the mill, party



Lucinda Gregory's niche in the Northshire chocolate world centers around her collection of antique tin molds

shop plastic molds. Au contraire, my fellow chocolate lover. All of her molded chocolates are made in tin vintage and antique molds from Holland, Germany and France—some dating back as far as the 1700s. The store is stocked with most every size and shape mold you can possibly imagine (over 800 to be exact).

And like her fellow chocolatiers, Lucinda Gregory swears by her ingredients. Since the shop's beginnings in 1975, Gregory has used a Swiss Choco-

Gregory never uses paraffin to add shine. The chocolate comes out of the mold looking naturally shiny.

late that's now manufactured and sold in the United States. And because her antique molds are made of tin, she never uses paraffin to add shine. The chocolate comes out of the mold looking naturally shiny.

Of course, the final proof is in the tasting. And for this chocolate lover, these three chocolatiers have certainly succeeded. ♦

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