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Hedonist Artisan Chocolates

Owners: Jennifer Posey and Zahra Langford

In business since: 2007

674 South Ave.

Rochester, NY 14620

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www.hedonistchocolates.com

Answers by Jennifer Posey

Chocolate philosophy: I find pleasure in chocolate. It is important to me that chocolate be a joy, not only to consume, but to create. I make chocolate by hand because it feels good. I love fresh, natural, preservative-free food and drink, so I use these ingredients in my products.

Inspiration: I have always had an interest in making food and experimenting with flavors, especially for holiday celebrations. Prior to chocolate, I spent much of my career in leisure management, creating opportunities for people to enjoy themselves. My partner Zahra and I had always dreamed of starting a small business. When we moved to Rochester, New York, we saw the opportunity to bring our interests together when we realized that the town needed an artisan chocolate company.

Training: Most of my experience comes from being in the kitchen and putting various ingredients together, just to see what will happen. Working part-time for an artisan chocolatier in California in 1999 exposed me to a new universe of techniques and flavors. When we decided to start the business, I formalized my chocolate education at Ecole Chocolat.

How did your business evolve? Hedonist Artisan Chocolates became official in January of 2007. Our initial plan did not include a physical storefront. We started making chocolate in a shared commercial kitchen that we found just a short walk from our home. We first sold chocolate on commission from a small counter inside a coffee shop in our neighborhood. From there we expanded into selling directly from our website (www.hedonistchocolates.com) and at farmers' markets, as well as wholesale to local retailers. In October of 2008, we gained the exclusive use of our kitchen space and converted part of it to accommodate retail sales. Our 'shop' is really just our working kitchen and customers love being able to get up close to the chocolate-making process.

Description of business: Hedonist Artisan Chocolates is located down a little alley in the historic and diverse South Wedge neighborhood in the city of Rochester, NY. This neighborhood is experiencing a renaissance, thanks in part to many hardworking entrepreneurs and residents dedicated to city living.

Because our shop and kitchen are one in the same, customers can see, smell and sample exactly what we are working on. We handcraft truffles and other treats, like chocolate bark and drinking chocolate, in small batches using French chocolate and fresh, natural ingredients. Our truffles are available in boxed collections that change with the seasons (Classic Dark, Fruit and Nut, Spring Teas, Spice, to name a few) or customers can select flavors from the daily board to create a custom collection.

We package Hedonist chocolate in deference to its sensuous contents, with an eye toward elegant minimalism, for customers to give as a gift or to indulge themselves. Our shop's décor is an interesting blend. We combine elements that you might find at a vintage European chocolatier's shop, dark wood trim and bright colors, with modern elements such as

stainless steel tables, racks and chocolate-making equipment. Our daily truffle collection is presented in a glass fronted shadowbox on the wall and the high quality ingredients we use are displayed throughout the kitchen space.

To our delight our clientele is made up of many different groups. Because of its vicinity to the Finger Lakes region, Rochester has many residents who love high quality fresh foods, wines and specialty cheeses and who attend the many local farmers' markets in the area. These are the people who naturally gravitate towards our style of chocolate-making. Because our shop is located in an up-and-coming city neighborhood, we also have customers who are new to artisan foods but who are interested in experiencing something different. In addition, our products have reached chocolate-lovers all over the country via our gift store partners and website.

How do you sell your chocolates? At our kitchen we sell our truffles by the piece (\$2 each) or in gift boxes, which range in price from \$12-\$58. Online we only sell our truffles in boxes. We sell our Artisan Bark and Drinking Chocolates by weight, both in-store and online.

What brands of chocolate do you use? We use Valrhona for our truffles. For our other items, such as bark and drinking chocolates, we use Noel.

What is your signature piece? We don't really have a signature chocolate; we change our collections with the seasons to keep things interesting and fresh. Our Spice Truffle Collection, which comes out for Valentine's Day, exemplifies our style. It consists of five truffles: Coconut Curry, Lemon Pepper, Orange Chipotle, Peanut Butter Cayenne and Raspberry Wasabi. These flavors, which are often found in savory dishes, are combined to enhance but not overwhelm the chocolate. Each truffle we make is cut (or rolled), dipped and decorated by hand.



Most unique piece? We have two that our customers can't get enough of: Ginger Pistachio Bark and Milk Chocolate Sesame Bark. The Ginger Pistachio is semisweet chocolate sprinkled with crystallized baby ginger, pistachios and salt. The Milk Chocolate Sesame is sesame infused milk chocolate, sprinkled with sesame seeds and sea salt. This stuff has convinced many a dark chocolate lover to lift their personal ban on milk chocolate, it is that good! Both of these creations combine savory and sweet flavors in

unexpected ways.

Favorite piece? Currently it is our Pecan Cranberry Cluster. We roast the pecans, then crust them in sugar and salt, add sweet dried cranberries and then a 70% dark chocolate. I like the sharp and pleasant reaction of sugar and salt exploding in my mouth as my teeth sink into the soft nut, and then the melting bittersweet chocolate takes over for a smooth finish.

How do you ship your chocolates? We safely pack the chocolates in nice boxes and wrap them with pretty tissue paper. When it is over 65 degrees we insulate the chocolate with an ice pack. We ship primarily via US Postal Service Priority mail which arrives in 2-3 days, but during the summer we re-

quire overnight shipping to ensure that the chocolate arrives in excellent condition.

How does your shop differ from others? When you enter our small shop, which is also our kitchen, you are instantly immersed in our chocolate-making process. Our fresh ingredients are visible; you can smell the quality of the chocolate; you can watch the chocolate being rolled, cut, dipped and decorated by hand; you can taste samples of tried and true recipes or experimental new flavors; and you can always talk directly with the chocolate makers (myself and my apprentices). When you order chocolate truffles, we take them directly from the trays that they are made on and package them into elegant boxes. Each piece of chocolate that comes out of our shop is unique, like a snowflake, because it is made by hand. The only machine in the Hedonist kitchen is the one that tempers our chocolate.

Anecdote: In late 2006, we had finally decided to start our chocolate business and were nearly finished with our business plan. We had almost everything in place, but we were still struggling to come up with the perfect name to express our style and approach to chocolate-making. Around this time, my partner Zahra was talking on the phone to her Aunt Carol, telling her about our latest travel and food adventures. Aunt Carol, whose lifestyle is quite different from ours, responded by affectionately referring to us as "a couple of hedonists." We knew right away it was the perfect name. A hedonist is someone whose life is devoted to the pursuit of sensual pleasures. We find our bliss in chocolate and hope to help our customers do the same.

Photos by Gerry Szymanski