



MARY

and Her Chocolate Factory

A St. Paul native turned a delicious dream into heavenly reality.

BY AMANDA FRETHEIM

When you walk into Chocolat Céleste, a small chocolate shop and factory located on University Avenue in St. Paul, your senses awaken to the sights and scents around you. No larger than several paces in any direction, the retail shop, with its hot pink walls and colorful displays open your eyes. Boxes of handmade truffles, bags of English toffee and bars of heart-healthy chocolate tempt your touch, while the smells of fresh chocolate wafting over the adjoining factory wall tickle your nose. As if in a church or a library, not wanting to disturb someone else's experience, patrons and employees speak in hushed tones, and as you gaze over the display cases and formulate your choices, your mouth begins to water.

Ranging in flavors from Dulce de Leche and Golden Cinnamon to Hot Chile Pepper and Key Lime, Chocolat Céleste truffles and bonbons are made daily from only the most natural ingredients, sans preservatives. Chocolate lovers choose from pre-boxed chocolates or create their own giftable combo from the individuals on display. If you're feeling overwhelmed, the lady of the shop can be found to assist in the process. Usually dressed in colors complementing her shop (pinks and blacks) with eyeglasses to match, Mary Leonard, chocolatier and founder of Chocolat Céleste, takes great pride in creating a product that in turn creates a memory for the one indulging.

A soft-spoken yet extremely passionate woman, Leonard hasn't always been a chocolate maker, though she's always been ahead of the trend, a risk taker with the goal of starting a business of her own. And, obviously, she's a chocolate lover. "I'm a person who likes the finer things in life," she says. "I like to spend more on things, but not buy very many things. Chocolate is one of those rare items that I will spend money on to get something that I really like."

In 1978, Leonard received a degree in Foods in Business from the University of Minnesota. After careers in food service management, recipe development, information systems management and marketing, Leonard decided to start her own business. Besides loving the sweet treat, Leonard had previously taken truffle-making classes and made chocolates at home for years; opening her own chocolate shop was a no-brainer. Believing you have to jump in with both feet to start a business, Leonard attended the top chocolate courses available, taught by Terry Richardson, patent holder for the Godiva chocolate center, and apprenticed in Vancouver with a master chocolatier. Leonard opened Chocolat Céleste, French for "heavenly chocolate," in February 2002, just 10 minutes away from her home in Highland Park. "I chose a location where I could work a lot," she says. "I knew I was going to devote my entire self to this, and I do work every day of the week. I'm reaping the benefits of having done that."

Chocolate was first discovered nearly 2,000 years ago in the depths of the Central and South American rain forests. The Mayans were the first to use the seed from the cacao tree, mixing it with seasonings to create a spicy, frothy drink. By the 1400s, the Aztecs were also drinking the chocolate, as well as using the cacao bean as a form of currency. After arriving in Mexico in the early 1500s, Spanish conquistadors began bringing the beans back to Spain. The new custom took off among the elite—they were the only ones who could afford the expensive import—and they were the first to sweeten the drink with sugar.

While the Spanish tried to keep chocolate a secret from their neighbors, by the 17th century it became a popular drink for the wealthy across much of Europe. Chocolate houses, exclusive clubs for men or for those who could afford the entry fee, began popping up across the continent. To keep up with demand, many countries developed cacao-growing plantations near the equator in places such as Sri Lanka and the West Indies, enslaving natives for the labor-intensive process.

With the rise of factories and machines during the Industrial Revolution, it was easier to make chocolate in mass amounts and as a solid, thus lowering the price and making the treat available to a wider audience. The United States passed a law in the early 1900s banning the receipt of cacao beans from plantations using slave labor, in turn allowing independent farmers to set up their own cacao plantations throughout Africa and Indonesia, where the bean is still harvested, fermented, dried, cleaned and roasted by hand before being traded on the Coffee, Sugar and Cocoa Exchange to chocolate makers around the world. Today, chocolate is a multibillion-dollar-a-year industry, with the United States topping out as one of its greatest importers.

Big companies used to buy cacao beans at a commodity price, never knowing if they were getting the best beans. Much like wine makers and vineyard owners with grapes, cacao growers now look closely at the soil and the bean type to create particular flavors. Fine, sweet cacao comes from the criollo tree found in Central America, representing just 5 percent of world production. Strong, bitter chocolate made from the beans of the forastero tree found in West Africa and South America represents a majority of the world's output. And the trinitario tree produces beans meshing both flavors and produces 15 percent of the world's cacao. According to Leonard, manufacturers develop relationships with these different plantations, bringing in varieties of beans that have never before been available in this country. Leonard buys her chocolate from these importers. "Chocolate is considered the new wine," she says. "It's not as much about price point as it used to be, but about varietals."

In her factory, only about three times the size of her retail shop, Leonard takes these specific varietals of chocolate and mixes in only the purest of ingredients, which include only fresh whipping cream (no additives) and butter from one of the top creameries in the country, located in Hope, Minn. The many different flavors and styles of the truffles and bonbons come from her imagination. "Because we're a Midwestern company, I stay with more traditional flavors," she says. "I don't want to cover up the chocolate with another flavor. I am working on being more nationally known, so we'll probably be expanding the line to include flavors that wouldn't be as popular here, like Earl Grey, lavender and rose."

It takes two processes over two days to make truffles and bonbons at Chocolat Céleste. To make the ganache (the creamy center), whipping cream is added to chocolate and melted to make an emulsion, with the butter and the flavoring added next. The ganache is refrigerated in either a bowl, which is scooped from to make truffles, or on a flat frame, which is cut by a huge cheese-cutter-like contraption to make the square bonbons. At the same time, chocolate chips (not like you'd find in a store) are poured into the giant melter. A \$10,000 machine, the melter automatically heats and cools the chocolate to the right temperatures to solidify it, which is called

tempering. This chocolate is transferred to the enrobing machine, a small conveyor belt on which the "centers" travel down to be enrobed. The bonbons are decorated with stencils (hearts, dots, illustrations, logos and everything in between), while the truffles are drizzled; both are boxed after 24 hours.

Since she opened her delicious doors five years ago, Leonard's business has done nothing but flourish. In 2003, Meryl Streep graced her pre-Oscar dinner tables with Chocolat Céleste goodies. In 2004, Leonard was named one of 10 "Best Emerging American Artisanal Chocolatiers," and the following year, Food Network queen Rachael Ray featured the sweet shop on her *Tasty Travels* show. Her gift boxes are frequent favors for the New Year's Eve celebrations at the Mirage, Bellagio and New York, New York hotels and casinos in Las Vegas, and she's been featured in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Woman's Day* and *Entrepreneur* magazine. However, none of this publicity has gone to her head; Leonard remains grounded, relaxed and completely devoted to her art as a master chocolatier. **W**

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Soul Food

Besides tasting so darn good, fine chocolate can keep you healthy, too.

- ♥ Stearic acid is the main saturated fat found in cocoa butter. It doesn't raise blood cholesterol levels, and it may also decrease platelet activity, contributing to heart health in a similar way as baby aspirin.
- ♥ Tannins found in chocolate actually prevent cavities.
- ♥ The antioxidants, or flavonoids, found in chocolate are similar to those found in red wine, tea, fruit and vegetables, and may reduce the risk of cancer and other age-related chronic diseases.
- ♥ Oleic acid, the monounsaturated fat in chocolate, can lower total cholesterol levels in the blood.
- ♥ A bar of dark chocolate contains fewer calories and twice the amount of antioxidants as milk chocolate.
- ♥ Chocolate is a good source of the essential minerals copper, magnesium and calcium.