

STATE FARE



PHOTOS BY RICHARD LOVRICH/TIMES UNION
CHOCOLATE peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

Sweet(Bliss) success

By **DOUG BLACKBURN**
 Staff writer

Ilene C. Shane doesn't think candy should be complicated. But she does believe candy should be delicious.

"I think candy should be what it is, very simple yet indulgent," says Shane, whose 2-year-old Manhattan-based business, SweetBliss, is gaining a glowing reputation for first-rate sweets. "I also think candy should be fun."

Shane's bread and butter, so to speak, is a line of candies that are part retro and part art. A good example is her Chocolate Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwich. Shane takes crunchy peanut butter, grape jelly and enrobes it in milk chocolate. The 4-ounce "sandwich" is then decorated playfully with dark, milk and white chocolate.

"My whole goal is to take basic flavors people are familiar with and then take them to the highest quality I can using the best ingredients," she says. "That makes it expensive, but it makes the memory taste as good as it is."

Shane has an impressive track record. For eight years, from 1993 to 2001, the one-time caterer was fashion designer Ralph Lauren's personal chef. It was life in the fast lane, traveling between Lauren's houses in the Hamptons, Jamaica and Colorado, each house having its own style and menus.

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toffee coated on both sides with Belgian chocolate and roasted almond pieces, remains one of her bestsellers.

SweetBliss is truly a dream come true for Shane. When she started planning her business, her goal was to have her candies sold at her favorite high-end store, Bergdorf Goodman.

She made an appointment with the buyer at the Fifth Avenue store in October 2001. The buyer was impressed and said he needed a complete line of candies. Shane returned to her loft in the Chelsea neighborhood and went to work. A week later she had 13 items and a contract.

Three months later, on Feb. 7, 2002, SweetBliss celebrated its launch party at Bergdorf Goodman. During 2003, the company experienced 66.5 percent growth.

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"I never expected to be with Ralph for eight years, and it got to the point where I needed to do something for myself," she says.

Lauren deserves some of the credit for SweetBliss. He was smitten by Shane's almond buttercrunch candies and began giving them out as gifts to friends and associates. She considered going into business with him, but decided it would be better to fly solo. The almond buttercrunch, featuring a hand-made



toffee coated on both sides with Belgian chocolate and roasted almond pieces, remains one of her bestsellers.

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"Bergdorf Goodman is a special place. It's like walking into somebody's estate. Everything is the highest end," she says. "To be there was just what I wanted. I guess it was meant to be. I think I have a little guardian angel on my shoulder pushing me in the right direction."

► SweetBliss chocolates are available at a number of stores in addition to Bergdorf Goodman. For a complete list, visit <http://www.sweetbliss.com>.