

Wine Spectator

www.winespectator.com

California Cabernet

Picking the Winners in the Tough 2000 Vintage

Francis Ford Coppola: Film And Wine

Napa's New \$100 Million Venture

Travel to Rome and Roussillon

Boutique Chocolates



NOV. 30, 2003

\$4.95 US \$7.95 CAN



TASTES

Boutique Chocolate

New companies think small and aim high, with quality at a premium

BY SAM GUGINO / PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALEXANDRA GRABLEWSKI



Many artisanal chocolates have familiar ingredients, as with Sweetfilas' chocolate-covered potato sticks (top) and its peanut butter cluster (bottom right), or the mint and pistachio in chocolates from Jubilee (center). A growing number have more surprising flavors. Vosges Haut Chocolat uses fillings such as (bottom left, from left) Taleggio cheese and walnuts; sea salt, caramel and pine nuts; and fennel pollen.



Chocolatiers who are sporting classic sweets include SweetBliss (top), Little Belle Farms (center two) and Cocoa Pete's.

Chocolate confectioners are popping up all over the place these days, much as boutique wineries did in the '90s. As with their winemaking brethren, the emphasis of this new wave of chocolatiers is on limited quantities made with high quality ingredients and a great deal of creativity. • And like the many boutique winery owners whose previous careers ranged from car racing to medicine, many of these confectioners weren't born into the trade. John Doyle studied Italian literature and art history as a prelude to starting Jubilee Chocolates with his wife, Kira.

Pete Siosberg was the man behind Pete's Wicked Ale microbrew before he became Cocoa Pete.

These and more chocolatiers are feeding America's increasing appetite for fine chocolate. "Chocolate has undergone a tremendous uptick in quality," says Ron Tanner, vice president of the National Association for the Specialty Food Trade, which sponsors the annual Fancy Food Shows. "As in a lot of categories like wine and cheese, people are not eating as much but they're eating better quality," Tanner says. "Instead of Hershey's Kisses at \$3 a pound, they'll pay \$30 a pound for lavender chocolate." In fact, retail prices for some of the confections I've been tasting cost \$60 a pound and beyond.

While artisanal chocolate candy-making has definitely grown, no one seems to know how much, according to Joan Steuer of Chocolate Marketing, a Beverly Hills, Calif., food consulting company specializing in chocolate. "There has been a renaissance in the last five years, but so many [confectioners] are under the radar screen," Steuer says. "Many sell out of their shops, on the Web, even at farmer's markets."

The SweetBliss line of chocolates was my favorite among those from several producers, though there were individual standouts aplenty. Here Shane created SweetBliss after she got tired of jetting with fashion magnate Ralph Lauren to his numerous residences as his personal chef. Lauren encouraged Shane to pursue confections

after she whipped up some butter-crunch candy that floored him.

Shane began with the chocolates she and many of us loved as kids. Then she elevated them to heights we couldn't fathom when we popped them into our mouths during Saturday matinees. For flavor combinations, Shane says, "I researched back into my past." But for raw materials, quality is her only concern: "Every ingredient I use is prime." For her black and white—basically s'mores dressed up for a ball—she creates her own marshmallows, caramel and graham crackers. Instead of enrobing them in cheap milk chocolate, she uses 60 percent cocoa chocolate from Belgium. The result is camp food for adults.

Her clusters are the size of golf balls, with centers that remind me of Ben & Jerry's ice cream flavors: cherry coconut, strawberry shortcake and, best of all, biscotti. Potato sticks are the familiar potato marchsticks made into clusters with a chocolate coating—a couch potato's dream. The almond butter crunch and pistachio butter crunch, however, are the standouts. Both are nutty, creamy and chocolaty all at once. The pistachio has a special snap and an almost spicelike quality.

John Doyle's chocolates were inspired by the confections of master chocolatier Larry Burdick in New Hampshire and by Judy Wicks, owner of the White Dog Café, who pioneered the melding of social consciousness and good food in Philadelphia. The result is chocolates with heart and soul. "Our goal is a progressive,