

SWEET DREAMS ARE MADE OF THIS

# Artisanal chocolate is local woman's new hobby

By LAURIE SULLIVAN

Children used to dream of dancing sugarplums at this time of year. But 21st century grown-ups who have tasted Margaret Smith's handmade chocolates will find themselves dreaming of bonbons filled with a delectable ganache all year-round. Smith, a Scarsdale resident, founded her own company, Odyssey Chocolates, earlier this year and is garnering a loyal following among local connoisseurs.

## Chocolate school

"I use French chocolate," Smith explained in a recent interview. It's refined and very smooth. It comes from single plantations. Where the chocolate is grown affects the flavor profile. I don't want to spend my time with an inferior product. It's really a labor of love." The ganache centers are a mixture of chocolate and liquid, usually cream and combined with fruits, teas, spices and other flavorings mixed with herbaceous chocolates from Africa and other exotic locales.

Much science goes into chocolate making, an art this Scarsdalian learned from the masters, including Jean Pierre Wybauw, with whom she studied at the Nottor School in Orlando, Fla. She polished her skills in courses at the Institute of Culinary Education; then at École Chocolat in Vancouver and also a course at Saratoga Chocolates in Saratoga, Calif. Smith said the people she studied with were "all famous chocolatiers."

She herself is now an artisanal chocolatier, with each heavenly piece crafted by hand. She doesn't have any employees — at least not yet. "I'm a one-woman shop. I just started the business this year. I want it controlled," she said. "I want to grow it in a measured pace. There's no rush." She hopes to hire someone to help her in her production facility, a commercial kitchen in Mamaroneck, where she is licensed by the state of New York. Her Web site, [www.odysseychocolates.com](http://www.odysseychocolates.com) recently made its debut.

## The gift of chocolate

Smith opened the business in February but actual production and deliveries didn't start rolling until September. Right now her bonbons are sold in a store in New Paltz; she ships 100 pieces at a time. La Dentellière, a home accessories store on East Parkway, is now selling nine- and 14-piece gift boxes for \$28 and \$38, respectively. Owner Michelle Anderson said the chocolate is "selling nicely," with customers buying the boxes as hostess gifts and for themselves. "I'm happy to support someone from our town," said Anderson, who has been in business 25 years, starting with



SCARSDALE INQUIRER/JIM MACLEAN

Margaret Smith takes chocolate to a new level.

her first store on Depot Place.

Smith also sells her gift boxes to restaurants like Buffet de la Gare in Hastings, which the owners are giving to their best customers as gifts.

Unlike commercial chocolate made in bulk, Smith's do not contain any preservatives and are not meant to sit on the shelf for months. "That is one of the strengths of an artisanal producer. It's fresh," she said.

The designs Smith puts on the chocolate, called transfers, are imported, which is why the company is named Odyssey, to denote the voyage of chocolates coming from all over the world. Most chocolates that people eat are blends.

Smith noted that the artisanal process allows one to appreciate the nuances of the chocolate. "Chocolate flavor profiles haven't been fully explored, except in the last few years," she said. She recently held a chocolate tasting in her home, which she described as "very fun." Her guests were treated to a blind taste test and learned much about the effects of soil and climate on the taste of chocolate from different parts of the world. Smith plans to hold a chocolate tasting class through the Scarsdale Adult School in March, where more "chocolate discoveries will be made."

The Heathcote chocolatier said that making fine chocolate involves a lot of chemistry. The chocolate has to be

heated and recrystallization must occur. "It takes a lot of skill when you're doing it by hand. You develop a feel for the temper over time," Smith said. "Temper has to do with the crystallization of the cocoa butter."

The chocolate comes in chunks or little pieces and has to be melted down. Once it is liquid it has to be brought to the right temperature in order for the proper crystallization to take place.

The gift boxes come in mixed flavors. The mint and dulce de leche, the coffee and the Middle Eastern spiced gianduja are among the favorites of her devotees.

An 18-year Scarsdale resident, Smith had a career in finance before her children, Gillian, now 16, Jeremy, 14 and Cameron, 11, were born. Her husband Laurence runs a hedge fund, and her children are very supportive. They especially like when she brings home chocolates that didn't make the grade. "Once in a while the transfer doesn't transfer and other things may go wrong, but not often," said Smith, who is 51. "That's the nature of crafting everything by hand."

She started the business after spending years of doing "lots of volunteer work in the community," including stints as Heathcote PTA president, PT Council president, and chairman of the School Board Nominating Committee. She is

currently on the board of the League of Women Voters.

Her leap from finance to chocolate was a natural progression. She makes very elaborate sugar dioramas and gingerbread houses and has always been interested in "the artistic side of food." She bakes a lot and enjoys cooking for holidays and special occasions.

She grew up in southern Minnesota. "I call it the warm part of the state," she said with a laugh. "I always think there's nothing to complain about with the winters here. [In Minnesota] the snow never melts until spring."

She said the best part about having her own business is that she loves to meet people going out with her product "in hand."

Smith, who has an undergraduate degree in literature from Yale, studied in Paris in her junior year and also has an M.B.A. from the University of Chicago. Her graduate degree is coming in handy with her new venture, as is her experience on the management side of JP Morgan.

In the future, Smith would like to expand the distribution of her product in Westchester. And hire that assistant.

If her customers follow her advice, that shouldn't be a problem. "I say eat chocolate every day, and I do eat two or three pieces every day. It keeps a smile on my face."