

Monterey County BUSINESS

SWEET DREAMS

CHOCOLATE ARTISAN MAKES
PERSONAL PASSION HIS BUSINESS

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You might say chocolate flows in Scott Lund's blood.

His grandma, Lula Lund, learned to make chocolate early, from a home economics teacher that shared a home with her family in Wyoming. When she married, she started making chocolates in her Salt Lake City home, selling them at the arms plant where she worked.

For five decades, she made her chocolates, by hand, in the basement candy shop her husband built for her. They were a family tradition, a holiday rush, a business venture and her private passion.

She made chocolate for almost her entire life, tempering and stirring and sampling, finally closing up her shop in 1996. Her grandson Scott Lund spent six years working alongside her in her aging years, wanting time to know his grandmother, but also learning the candy-making business.

As her eyesight weakened, he helped her read temperature gauges. As she grew more frail, he lifted heavy pots for her. And she, in turn, passed along the science and the joy of the task.

Scott Lund, who holds an MBA from Brigham Young University, went to work for Shell Oil Co. in Houston, then moved to Salt Lake City to open a string of laundries. But every Christmas, he'd send handmade chocolates to his former Brigham Young classmate, Aaron Davidson.

Today, chocolate is an everyday preoccupation for both Lund, 40, and Davidson, 43, who have formed a partnership to manufacture and sell high-end chocolates. They signed a lease on a 5,000-square-foot production facility in Monterey late last year, and since then, they have retrofitted flooring and walls, developed plans and set up a state-of-the-art candy-making plant on the premises.

Orders have started to roll in, a Web site is in development, and

more than 100 people turned out for a ribbon-cutting last week in Monterey.

And Lula's Chocolates isn't even fully finished.

The first shipment of boxes arrived at their Ryan Ranch facility a few days ago, followed by the pads that will be used to cushion the delicate chocolates from the box tops.

The partners are negotiating for retail space and say they're focusing most of their efforts on Carmel, which they see as the perfect marketplace to support a high-end chocolate shop. But their spacious plant offers room to grow: enough, they say, to eventually support as many as 10 retail stores.

It's been a roundabout path for two MBAs. It wasn't until Lund provided a gourmet chocolate spread for one of the opening events for the Salt Lake City Olympics that he realized the true potential for the product, and even then, it wasn't an overnight decision to sell off his business, move his family to a new state and convince his former classmate to come aboard.

But making chocolate was more than work: Lund describes it as something of a passion, and so he made a leap of faith.

These days, he's like a kid in a candy store, except he's no longer a kid, and the company's his own.

"It's just a miracle that we're here," he said.

For Davidson, who describes himself as the secondary partner in the venture, it's also been a shift: After receiving his MBA, Davidson went to work for what was then Price Waterhouse in Southern California, moved into database consulting, then spent several years building custom homes in Arizona.

While Lund attended Carmel Middle School and says he's always wanted to come back to the Monterey Peninsula, their pursuit of a retail location is more than nostalgic: Both partners see it as a perfectly suited location to host the company's flagship store.

But they're not looking to bank on retail sales alone: Davidson



Scott Lund, owner and chef at Lula's Chocolates shows off its Ryan Ranch production kitchen.

VERN FISHER/The Herald

and Lund hope to develop a strong corporate sales market and to tap into the potential for Internet sales. In addition, Lula's Chocolates will sell wholesale to other retailers, with additional distribution through catering and events.

In the spotless production plant, mixers and machines and mysterious-looking conveyer belts are arranged for efficient operations. But among the modern equipment stand two ancient industrial-looking mixers, off to one side.

The machines, said Lund, were his grandmother's, used to beat the confections' centers to the proper consistency. Sometime down the road, he's hoping to develop a small museum to showcase the aged roots of his family's chocolate tradition.

Other equipment includes a device to extrude centers in perfect little balls of sweetness, a conveyer that builds a chocolate base on each candy and chills them on a moving cold plate to harden the bottoms, then carries them through an enrobing bath where they are doused in a coating of chocolate.

Blowers can be set to remove as much chocolate as needed to get the desired thickness on each candy, and the final step is a personal flourish -- someone embosses an initial into the still-soft top of each confection to denote its variety: O for orange, V for vanilla centers, R for raspberry, and the like.

"Chocolate is undergoing a renaissance, like the wine industry," said Davidson. "I think California is really taking that lead. The American public is being educated as to the differences in chocolate."

Consumers are more educated, more interested, said Davidson, and are willing to pay more for quality ingredients and premium flavors.

"Once you taste a really good, top-of-the-line chocolate," said Davidson, "you can tell there's a difference."