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Paint the Town Chocolate

Kansas City's Chocolatiers Can Satisfy Your
Valentine's Craving By Anne Brockhoff

Dark or milk, with nuts (or rosemary, or sea salt) or without, molded into truffles or drizzled over popcorn—whatever the chocolate craving, one of a growing number of Kansas City chocolatiers can surely satisfy it.

They include long-time favorites Andre's Confiserie Suisse, Panache Chocolatier and Annedore's Fine Chocolates, as well as newcomers Christopher Elbow Artisanal Chocolate and **Frou Frou Sweets**. Each has its own approach, ranging from Old World to cutting edge, but all offer handcrafted quality worthy of a Valentine's Day splurge.

"Everybody likes you when you're bringing chocolates. There's nothing bad about it," says **Frou Frou** owner Laura Caron.

Chocolate accounts for most of the \$1 billion-plus that is typically spent on Valentine's confectionery, according to the Chocolate Manufacturers Association. It is the traditional flavor of romance—a strong association that dates back at least to the Aztecs, who believed chocolate, was an aphrodisiac.

It docs indeed contain the chemical phenylethylamine, which is associated with the pleasant feeling of being in love. But history and science don't matter much to most people. Chocolate just makes them happy.

"Valentine's is our single biggest day," says Sharon Hoffman, one of Panache's co-owners. "It's not a perfunctory gift. People are usually smiling when they come in (to buy it)."

Hoffman and her partner, Eileen Cohen, opened a franchised chocolate store on the Country Club Plaza in 1979. When the deal didn't work out they launched their own concept a year later. "That gave us the ability to do what we wanted to do," says

Hoffman, like serving chunk chocolate cookies, brownies and other baked goods and, later, adding ice cream and a coffee bar.

Panache offers what Hoffman calls a purist's selection, with nut-, cream- and caramel-filled chocolates, truffles and chocolate creations like Chocopoppo (chocolate-coated popcorn) and chocolate-cover corn flakes.

Most products are made on-site, including the chocolate "leg" (a sparkling bracelet can be clasped around the "ankle"), truffles (a diamond ring can be tucked into the box), chocolate roses, heart-bedecked chocolate-coated Oreos and other February favorites.



"One thing more people are asking for these days is dark chocolate," Hoffman says. She credits the increase partly to dark chocolate's supposed health benefits: the National Confectioners Association says it contains high levels of antioxidants, which may help prevent heart disease and boost HDL, "good" cholesterol levels. In the 1970s, dark chocolate accounted for 20 percent of sales at André's; it's now a fifty-fifty split between dark and milk, says owner Marcel Bollier. Another trend of note: consumers are increasingly keen on a quality chocolate of unique origin.

Chocolate is similar to coffee in that its character changes depending on which variety of beans it is made from and where those beans were grown. Cacao trees (their botanical name is Theobroma which means "food of the gods") grow near the equator in Africa, Asia and Latin America, with West Africa accounting for about 70 percent of global production. Forastero and Trinitario are the most plentiful varieties; Criollo (often called flavor beans) are more scarce, expensive and flavorful. International companies like Guittard and Callebaut process beans into chocolate and then sell it to local chocolatiers. Only recently has there been a ready supply of and a market for chocolates that retain the distinct flavor of their origin.

"There is a trend toward finer, more special chocolates, like single-source chocolate and chocolate made only from Criollo beans," Bollier says. That's why he's added three single-source truffles that taste of beans from Madagascar, Venezuela and Ecuador.

Such products simply weren't available when Bollier's father, Andre, started out. The senior Bollier brought his family from Switzerland to Kansas City in 1955 to open a chocolate shop hut, found little demand for high-end candies in Russell Stover's hometown.



So, he added a tearoom and began serving pastries and lunches.

Kansas City gradually came to appreciate André's European-style chocolates as international travel became more commonplace and brands like Godiva reached the mass market. Truffles (made with real cream, so they have a four-week shelf life) and chocolate-coated almonds are now perennial favorites, although the chocolate orange peel and the marzipan also have loyal followings. The seasonal selection includes heart-shaped boxes made from chocolate or rocher (sliced, chocolate coated almonds) and filled with other candy.

Everything is made in-house (including ingredients like roasted almonds, nut pastes and candied citrus peel), and the business remains a family one. Although Bollier's father passed away in 1985, his mother, Elsbeth, continues to help out. His son, Rene, and daughter-in-law, Nancy, joined them in 2002. Brigitte and Kevin Gravino, Bollier's sister and brother-in-law, own the Hawthorne Plaza location.

Bollier plans to expand his Plaza building in the next year or so to better meet increased retail and wholesale demand, but he's determined growth won't affect Andre's craftsman like approach to chocolate making.

"It's a delicate thing to expand," he says. "I never want to get to the point where we're a factory"

Change is also afoot at Annedore's. Nancy Hatch and Annedore Vegezzi opened the chocolate store in 1988 and later added a coffee shop. Hatch's daughter, Kristen, joined them in 1996, and Vegezzi (who once worked for Andre Bollier) retired a year later.

Hatch says she was also ready to retire: about the same time, former employee Mary Beddow Lemon was thinking about returning to the chocolate world. So, in October 2004, Lemon bought Annedore's. "One of the most important things to me is that the quality of service stays the same and that the traditions stay the same," says Lemon, who plans to maintain the product range while updating business operations and expanding sales to other cities. Annedore's sells handcrafted chocolate truffles, creams, triple-dipped almonds and the like, along with seasonal specialties like Valenswine (ribbon bedecked chocolate pigs), Love Mice and chocolate covered strawberries.

Hatch (who stayed on for a lengthy transition period) says that while Kansas City's palate remains conservative, new ginger and rosemary chocolates and an "Aztec" chocolate bar with cinnamon and chilies has been well received. The key, whatever the flavor or shape, is quality, she says.

"Good chocolate is so rich, you really only need two pieces," Hatch says. "There's something about quality and satisfaction that's worth paying for."

Christopher Elbow's customers certainly seem to agree. The former American Restaurant pastry chef started his company in November 2003 and last autumn, opened a retail counter on Southwest Boulevard. Hundreds of customers regularly line up to buy his chocolates during First Fridays in the Crossroads District, while orders from around the country flooded in following national exposure in O, The Oprah Magazine and on The Food Network. "It's beyond control. There's far more demand than I ever expected. We can't make enough," Elbow says.

Production is limited, in part, because he makes chocolates in small batches, using fresh ingredients and no preservatives, which gives them a shelf life of just three weeks. Some flavors are familiar, others are exotic and all are tiny works of art.

Elbow and his staff use tinted cocoa butter to create glossy jewel-like truffles and bonbons that look almost too good to eat. The Fleur de Sel caramel (caramel with sea salt) is a multi-faceted dome with a dab of white, while the raspberry is swirled with vivid red, and both are top sellers. Others include a rosemary caramel in orange, blue, green and red; a Champagne truffle glittering with gold dust; a Chinese 5 Spice sporting what looks like small bursts of yellow fireworks; and a bourbon pecan with a gleaming alligator pattern.

Chocolates are sold by the piece or in boxes of four, nine or twenty-one. A limited edition red and magenta Valentine's box will be available by February. Other new offerings include a rich drinking chocolate in two flavors roasted almond toffee and chocolate candied hazelnuts. A hot chocolate bar is also in the works.

Elbow has proven that the artistic chocolate sells, but there's also a market for chocolate comfort food. And that's what **Laura Caron** is going for with her **Frou Frou** chocolates.

"Desserts shouldn't shock you. They should make you go 'ooohh, yeah...'" Caron says.

Frou Frou chocolates are big enough for small bites and can certainly qualify as dessert. They come in four flavors: peanut butter milk chocolate, chocolate toffee, raspberry dark chocolate and chocolate mocha, flavors were picked because they're the ones she and her friends like best. In fact, Caron's friends are the reason she's in the business—she made chocolates for holiday gifts one year and her friends encouraged her to sell them.

Caron's varied career spans restaurants and catering and even a stint as a private investigator. She launched Frou Frou (named for a childhood pet) in August 2004.

Each chocolate is shaped by hand ("It's very Zen," Caron says), and Caron takes a similarly singular approach to marketing. Rainy Day Books began carrying her chocolates after she donated some for an in-store reading. They're also sold at Pryde's Old Westport and during symphony events at the Lyric Theater. And Frou Frou was featured during the opening of artist Robyn Nichols' recent show at the Gallery in the Crossroads Arts District.

Yes, there's a lot of competition. But Caron says there's something for everyone and plenty of room for Frou Frou to grow.

After all, she says, "this is a chocolate town."

