

AT COCOLAT, THE TRUFFLE IS NOT A TRIFLE

BY Jeanette Ferrary

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TEN years ago this month, Alice Medrich tucked her brown curls under a crisp pastry chef's hat and began creating chocolate desserts. For three days she and a friend worked almost continuously to meet a 10 A.M. Saturday deadline. When she finally unlocked the doors to her new little bake shop, Cocolat, in Berkeley, Calif., chocolate desserts filled every display case. Though the opening was a little late, just before noon, it did not matter. Nobody was there anyway.

"I don't know what happened next," Ms. Medrich recalled, "but three hours later there was nothing left in the shop." What she did the rest of that day is captured in a poster-sized, full-color photo hanging in her office: Alice Medrich is pictured looking like an old rag doll slumped in the chair, her hair in strings, her arms limp and a chocolate-smearred chef's hat crumpled on the floor.

"Fortunately we were closed for the next two days," she said. "and the learning curve is very steep when you don't know very much. By the time we reopened on the following Tuesday, we had made enough for the whole day."

Now celebrating its 10th successful year, Cocolat numbers seven shops throughout the San Francisco Bay area, serves an expanding wholesale and retail trade and provides national distribution from Ms. Medrich's original shop in Berkeley to Zabar's in Manhattan. Recently, Cocolat has expanded into the mail-order business, a move many local food people regard as typical of the company's innovative style "They were the first new-style dessert place in the neighborhood," said Alice Waters, founder of the Chez Panisse restaurant, a neighbor in an area now known as the "Gourmet Ghetto," which also includes superb gelato parlors and sushi take-out.

"At Cocolat, I had the first chocolate I'd had in this country that tasted like real chocolate," said French-born Michael Wild, co-owner of Oakland's highly respected Baywolf Restaurant. "Something about the flavor was like the French and Hungarian cakes I'd had in Europe: sophisticated, intense and wonderful to look at. They were professional desserts available on the street; all those American bakery fluffy things were utterly meaningless in comparison."

With a dozen employees in a 10,000-square-foot kitchen, Cocolat produces more than 1,000 cakes a week and 2.5 million truffles a year. Vats of white and dark chocolate are kept at precise temperatures. An industrial oven with 20 removable shelves bakes 100 cakes at a time. While one worker shapes delicate marzipan rose petals, the color of apricots, for one of the chocolate tortes, another rolls out a thin chocolate shell and fills it with chocolate mousse.

Employees are mostly in their 20's, and, until very recently, were all women. They were avid home bakers who saw Cocolat as an opportunity to improve their skills and learn large-scale production.

Alice Medrich, who is 37 years old, started her formal training in chocolates, pastry and desserts at Lenotre Cooking School in Paris. She also studied desserts with Camille Cadier as well as Marguerite Lapiere, who taught candy-making in her Paris apartment.

At the beginning, Ms. Medrich's genius lay in handcrafting delicious little confections in her kitchen. Now her genius lies in figuring out ways to create beautiful, jewel-like desserts that others can make.

"Anybody can make one cake," Ms. Medrich said. "The challenge is making a multitude of them."

However, once made, they sell quickly. Not surprisingly, the per capita consumption in this county has risen from 8.5 to 11.2 pounds in five years, according to the Chocolate Manufacturers of America. "Dessert is a way of rewarding ourselves for denying ourselves," Ms. Medrich said. "When we decide to splurge, we want only the best. And many people including myself don't believe it's dessert unless it's chocolate."

Cocolat's hallmark and its most popular form of chocolate remains the truffle. A standby is the Sara Bernhardt, a little dome of chocolate cream on an almond macaroon, all covered in bittersweet chocolate.

Blanc de blanc is Ms. Medrich's best-selling white-on-white truffle, and her thin white chocolate shells are always in demand.

Wherever possible, Alice Medrich prefers to use American ingredients. Her newest temptation, as yet unnamed, is a thin chocolate ball filled with California's St. George eaux de vie: quince, pear, kiwi or raspberry.

"When you pop them in your mouth," Ms. Medrich explains, drawing upon her way with sensual descriptions, "the bittersweet chocolate shatters and the fruity liquid bursts onto every waiting taste bud."

Cocolat's newest market is the restaurant, from popular new cafes and grills to large hotel restaurants and upscale chains. Cocolat confections add a new dimension to the dessert cart. There are none of the usual rosettes and colored fluffs; on the contrary Cocolat desserts are sleek and sophisticated, almost stark.

"I think of the visuals in dessert like sculpture, almost like architecture," Ms. Medrich said. "I don't say 'O.K. the dessert is done; now let's decorate it.' What I love is putting a dessert together, that the putting together is the decoration. In other words, how you put it together is how it looks." On the other hand, she says she believes that the special effects should never compromise the ingredients because "taste is number one, number one, number one." As the food writer Caroline Bates once wrote: "Cocolat is to chocolate what Tiffany is to diamonds."

Of all the elements contributing to Cocolat's success, perhaps the most important is what might be called the Willie Wonka factor, a kind of childlike joy with chocolate in nearly any form. This basic and almost universal attraction was eloquently expressed by Cocolat's master truffle maker, Ricardo Lahud, during a recent 10-year anniversary celebration in San Francisco.

"It's fun," he said, his hands covered in molten chocolate, "I learned all this in kindergarten."

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