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FROM FARM KITCHEN TO TOP SHELF

A Sustainable Chicago Chocolatier

BY ANNE SPIELMAN

PHOTOS BY GRANT KESSLER

“The key to making caramels is to use top-quality ingredients,” declares Katherine Duncan, as she stirs a batch of agave nectar, wildflower honey, pure cane sugar, and heavy cream in the kitchen at Flourish Bakery that she rents one day a week to produce the caramels and truffles for Katherine Anne Confections, her two-year-old Chicago business.

Duncan should know. She’s been whipping up caramels since she was 10. It began as a home-schooling project for her and three siblings on the family farm in Wilson, Wisconsin, (population 200 or so). They used cream from the farm’s Jersey cows and a recipe from an old Fanny Farmer cookbook that her mother modified slightly. Katherine stuck with it, and by the time she was 15 she was preparing a few pounds a week that her father took to work and sold for 25-cents a caramel. “Even then I thought it might be a business because I always wanted to be my own boss,” she admits.

A few years later, in 2002, Duncan moved to Chicago with her boyfriend, now husband, and got a job at Potbelly Sandwich Works to support them while he went to graduate school. For the holidays, they always made caramels and truffles, (rustic, cocoa-rolled one) as gifts. “It slowly became something I really liked doing,” she recalls. “I kept thinking of new flavors and looking up recipes. I taught myself to temper chocolate from a website and worked briefly with a candy-maker.”

The decision to start the business came about gradually. Her serious research on sourcing for ingredients from local farmers, boxes and, labels began in May of 2006, and she launched Katherine Anne Confections that October with a \$20,000 line of credit and a website for retail sales. News of the incredibly rich, melt-on-your-tongue caramels soon spread by word of mouth. Coupled with appearances at shows, such as the Merchandise Mart’s One of a Kind Show and



Sale, the publicity helped build a customer base, especially for corporate and holiday gifts.

Initially, Duncan made her three kinds of caramels and six flavors of truffles at the shared Kitchen Chicago, but she moved to Flourish a year ago—about the same time she quit her Potbelly job—for the bigger kitchen and air-conditioning, which enables her to produce truffles year-round. They account for roughly half the business (an average of 700 to 800 truffles a week), though she’s focused a little more on caramels (about 25 lbs. a week), because she thinks fewer good ones are available. And she keeps refining the recipes.

Rather than being the chewy-hard norm, Duncan’s caramels are silky smooth, the result of a three-stage cooking process as well as the carefully chosen ingredients. While she’s been using wildflower honey from May’s Honey Farms in Harvard, Illinois, since 2006—after testing 10 locally produced honeys she found on the internet—just this June she switched from the usual corn syrup to “more natural” organic agave nectar, even though it required adjusting other recipe quantities. Instead of vanilla

extract, she incorporates Madagascar vanilla paste from Waukegan-based Nielsen-Massey Vanillas, Inc., a water- and alcohol-free product she says really improves the taste. Guittard chocolate and kosher sea salt are other staples, and she’s still looking for local walnuts to toast for the chocolate-walnut flavor. “The biggest challenge is the cream, because local farmers don’t want to deliver the small quantities (8-10 quarts a week) I need,” she points out. She currently buys her cream and unsalted butter from the bakery.

To achieve the vanilla caramels’ golden color and complex flavor, Duncan starts by heating the sugar, honey, agave nectar, and cream to 248 degrees F. Next she shocks the temperature back down by adding cold cream, heats again into the 250’s, cools with cold butter, then heats a third time, folds in the vanilla, and pours the mixture



into sheet pans. The caramel cools for 12 hours at room temperature before being cut into rectangles and wrapped in old-fashioned taffey wrap (waxed paper rectangles). For chocolate caramels, Guittard unsweetened chocolate goes in at the first stage and the vanilla is reduced slightly. Nuts for the chocolate-walnut caramels are folded in at the end.

The truffles, individually hand-dipped in Duncan's tempering machine (it regulates the temperature of melted chocolate so it won't "bloom," or turn white when it solidifies), also reflect her passion for local ingredients. The mildest, Cherry Amaretto, relies on dried, tart, red Michigan cherries sweetened with sugar and sunflower oil (rather than corn syrup). She chops and macerates them in kirsch and amaretto, then combines them with cream and white chocolate for the filling. It's piped from a pastry bag by weight (16 grams each) and rolled into balls. Finally, Duncan enrobes the truffles in white chocolate and lines them up on trays to set, each topped with a dried cherry chunk. Java truffles, the most robust, feature dark-roast fair trade coffee beans from Chicago's Metropolis Coffee Company that are coarsely ground, brewed with cream, and strained over chocolate (58 and 72 percent cacao mixed) to melt it. Supplemented by a little vanilla paste and imported coffee extract, the ganache becomes truffles the same way as the Cherry Amaretto, only the balls are dipped in 72-percent cacao Guittard and garnished with whole coffee beans. The other flavors, developed to appeal to a wide variety of tastes with four types of chocolate—milk, white (made with real cacao), semi-sweet (58 percent cacao), bittersweet (72 percent cacao)—are hazelnut, crème de menthe, citrus, and coconut rum.

Duncan's commitment to sustainability extends to the packaging, beautiful blue-and-white boxes made of renewable long grasses

in the Philippines. "I found them thanks to the owners of Kitchen Chicago and fell in love," she says. "I know importing them uses energy, but I think the fact that they're fair trade balances that, and I only order one shipment a year."

Priced at \$8.50–\$42 per box, Katherine Anne Confections are sold at Whole Foods (in Chicago), Pastoral (during the holiday season), Eno in the Hotel InterContinental and a number of other outlets. Carole Lamont, cheese buyer for Whole Foods South Loop, has been stocking three and seven-piece truffle assortments since spring and says they sell extremely well, especially when sampled out. "They're a great product," she says. "We also like them because they're local and Katherine does demonstrations in the store." ☞

Learn more at: www.katherine-anne.com or call 773-727-3248.

Anne Spiselman is a Chicago-based freelance writer whose specialties include restaurants, food and wine, performing arts, and travel—in other words, most of the fun things in life. She currently writes for Plate, Diversion, the Chicago Reader and, for many years, she was the restaurant critic for Crain's Chicago Business and a restaurant reviewer for Chicago magazine. When Anne pitched Edible Chicago this story idea, we knew that writing about chocolate was on her list of the fun things in life.

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—Ann Flood



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