
Lime-Coconut
White Chocolate Crisp
Orange
Milk Chocolate Crisp
Coffee
Milk Chocolate Crisp
Milk Chocolate Crisp
Deborah Ann's
Homemade Chocolates
$19.95 per pound
Lime
Dark Chocolate Crisp
Mint

Mike Grissmer '93 AND **Debbie Backes** '92 OPENED A LITTLE CHOCOLATE SHOP IN RIDGEFIELD, CONNECTICUT, IN 1998, AFTER WORKING SEVERAL YEARS AT CORPORATE JOBS IN NEW YORK. "WE MOVED, HAD THE BABY, BOUGHT THE HOUSE, QUIT THE JOB, OPENED THE STORE," SAYS DEBBIE. "IT WAS CRAZY." AFTER FIVE YEARS IN BUSINESS, THEY HAVE INVENTED NEW CANDIES, PERFECTED CLASSICS LIKE TOFFEE, AND LEARNED TO ANTICIPATE THE RHYTHMS OF THE CANDY SEASONS. NOW THEY'RE LOOKING TO DEVELOP THEIR BUSINESS FURTHER.

Making Better and Better Chocolates

by Jonathan T. Weisberg

Photographs by Margaret Furniss.

Making molded chocolates, such as chocolate rose lollipops, looks like a simple process—you just catch the stream of liquid chocolate in a plastic mold, let it settle, cool, and harden. Then you put it on the shelf and sell it.

At Deborah Ann's Homemade Chocolates, this happens right behind the counter, so customers can watch. But the machine that maintains a reservoir of liquid chocolate and then pumps it into the molds is constantly dealing with a temperamental substance. "You can't just melt the chocolate and then work with it," says Mike. "You have to melt it in a very specific way and control the temperature." If not done right, the chocolate won't have the bright luster and snappy break of a chocolate bar. And it's tricky enough that there was a time when Mike and Debbie weren't sure they'd ever be able to make the molded roses right—although now they've graduated to making cows, soccer balls, and bunnies.

And there's something perfect about the final product. Chocolate melts at about 97 degrees, just about the temperature inside your mouth. Scientists are studying it, trying to identify all of its active compounds and comprehend their effects on mood. But non-scientists know that they like it—the average American consumes about twelve pounds of chocolate a year.

In their five years in the chocolate business, Mike and Debbie have learned to create dozens of varieties of cream-center chocolates, toffee, and fudge, including some new flavors they've discovered or invented themselves.

Managing a chocolate shop in a suburban town has produced its discoveries as well. There was the first Friday after they opened, when, Backes recalls, "we learned the entire middle school walks to town on Fridays and invades the stores. We had a hundred sixth and seventh graders in here. Now we know they're coming...They're good customers."

Then there was the ever-expanding list of special occasions for which people demand chocolates. Backes recalls some of the events she couldn't have anticipated: "People get stuff for their teachers now for everything. So we sell chocolate for Halloween, for Christmas, teacher appreciation week, then the end of the school year...We try to be prepared. But you forget. When's the end of basketball season? When's the end of hockey season? Dance recitals, chorus performances—everyone wants chocolate instruments and ballet shoes."

Grissmer devotes more of his time to the candy-making, and some of his favorite discoveries have been labor-saving devices, such as a press that creates perfectly shaped candy centers with the spin of a handle. Or there's a rotating mixing table that they use to assemble gift boxes of assorted candies. They used to spend hours spreading boxes out on a flat table, and dropping candies in one by one. The new machine is "so much more efficient. So great. This is one of those things you don't necessarily learn about until you stumble across somebody who makes them." Grissmer turns to the machine, "Where've you been all my life?"

Grissmer and Backes started their chocolate business from scratch. They met at Yale Law School, and after graduation, Grissmer worked at a talent agency and Backes practiced tax law at a major firm—both in New York. They were satisfied with their work, but also wanted to do something more creative. "We were throwing ideas back and forth, and hit on this idea that we both thought sounded like fun," says Backes. She remembered watching her

mother make chocolates when she was a little girl. "I said one time to my sister, 'Wouldn't it be fun if Mom were in a glass cage and people could watch her?'" When she started designing a hypothetical chocolate shop, she imagined an open kitchen behind the display area, so that customers could see the candies being made.

Grissmer explains his first reaction, "I thought it sounded like a crazy idea." But then the couple visited a chocolate shop in Greenwich Village, with an eye toward one day running one themselves. "We walked in, it was around Easter, and it had this great smell of chocolate...There were lots of kids and their parents in there looking at the chocolates, and everybody seemed really happy...It was just really exciting, and I stopped thinking she was crazy after that."

Grissmer started learning how to make different kinds of candies. "It was an area I didn't know anything about. At Yale, for whatever reason, candy-making isn't part of the law school curriculum." He went to a number of regional classes and workshops. "Then you spend a lot of time in the library doing research and trying to learn the science of candy-making, so you can make the candies you want to make. It was kind of like studying to write a brief." And next came the practical application of this book learning. "You're in your kitchen experimenting with things, seeing what happens when you try something new." This stage was more fun

than writing out a legal argument, Grissmer says, because "usually the mistakes are pretty tasty too."

Not all the research was library-based either. Before opening the store, Grissmer and Backes collected chocolate samples from a variety of chocolate manufacturers. Because the process of acquiring raw cocoa beans, grinding them down, mixing them with other ingredients, then tempering the mixture requires a number of large machines and a whole separate expertise, nearly all candy-makers get their chocolate from a chocolate manufacturer. "We had friends and family over to taste test and figured out which ones we liked best," says Grissmer. They settled on three American brands of chocolate and were ready to go.

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In 1998, they made the paradigm shift between New York/corporate life and Ridgefield/small business/family life.

But before they could actually open their store, they had to learn to produce candy on a commercial scale and to use large-scale equipment, like the 35-foot-long enrober, which lays the chocolate coating on candy centers. Backes: "We thought we would open in the spring, but making the large batches and using the equipment was a lot different than making small pots in our kitchen in our apartment." This was when they almost gave up on molded chocolates. "At one point we said, 'We're never going to have molded chocolates, because we can't do it.' For almost a week we couldn't get it, and then it just clicked."

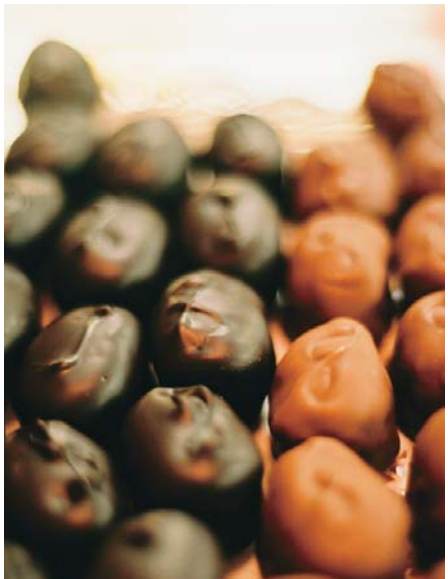
They opened their doors in September. "We really didn't know what we were getting into," says Backes. "We were busy when we first opened, because everybody was excited, because it was a new place... Then the holidays came, and we just were swamped with people. And we had no idea how much candy we needed, so we were running out of everything. We were working all night trying to make more, because it wasn't like we could just call and order it, the whole idea was we were making it...But with each holiday, we got more of a sense of how much we would need."

The store now is a result of five years of candy experimentation and creation. Looking over the rows and rows of chocolates, Grissmer says, "Ideas come from all over." One of their most popular flavors is Peanut Butter Crunch, which was first suggested by a customer who brought a sample of a favorite chocolate from California. Grissmer experimented for nearly a year before he had a similar candy he was happy with.

Grissmer explains that the challenge "was trying to figure out how to get the soft peanut butter and the crunch together. I thought you could make a syrup and cook it up really high, like how you make a lollipop...and then mix the peanut butter in. And it kind of worked, you got kind of a Butterfinger consistency. You pour it out and fold it over a couple times. But I couldn't figure out how to cut it so that I would get a consistent shape. Then I started to experiment with doing something where I wasn't cooking at all, using peanut butter, and I found a neat crunchy ingredient, it's like an ice cream cone almost, it's a European item, and sort of mixed it together." The end result was the "soft, crunchy center" he'd been striving for.

Another suggestion came from an employee from Ecuador: white chocolate with lime and coconut. "We tried it and it was really good," says Grissmer. Or their son became a source. "My son, when he was three, was going to school and they made fluffer nutters one day, and he said, 'These are so good.'" So Grissmer created the Peanut Butter Pillow, marshmallow and peanut butter coated in chocolate.

Other experiments had less happy results: "We did a cornflake cluster, covered with chocolate. This wasn't high science, but it was something we thought tasted good. But it never really took off."



As they created new flavors, they also were able to improve candies they already made. For instance, a new mixing drum enabled them to make their cream fillings from scratch (what Grissmer calls "the right way"), rather than using pre-made cream and flavor from a tube. "We could do the raspberry cream flavor with real raspberry... and the orange creams you make with orange juice, and you get

a really great flavor." Grissmer adds, "We want to make it better. Certainly a raspberry cream isn't anything that's unique, but we think the way we're doing it is pretty unique because it gives you this real raspberry flavor."

Grissmer walks along his display case pointing out landmarks of his chocolate-making career. "Then we have the turtles. We can't call them 'turtles', that's Nestle's name. I don't think Nestle would come after us. But after graduating from the Law School, we'll be careful." The caramel in the *clusters* (not turtles) is, of course, made "the right way," with real cream and real butter, and it's cooked on the stoves right behind the counters. Then there are several varieties of bark (chocolate with nuts), trays loaded with different flavors of fudge, chocolate covered peanut brittle, chocolate crisp squares....

Being in the candy business, Mike and Debbie are sometimes overwhelmed by sweetness. "I've tasted so many different creams," says Grissmer. And Backes says that when a new customer comments on how good the store smells, because of the tempered chocolate basking in the back, she's always surprised. "We don't even smell it anymore." But they both can still quickly pick a favorite candy (Butter Crunch in both cases, though Debbie takes Mint Patties as a fallback).

"I had always liked Hershey bars," Grissmer says. "Then, once I got into this business and really got to taste things and learned about the difference between chocolates, I can't eat a Hershey bar now. It's really so sweet and it's so grainy." Perhaps inevitably, they face a taste backlash from the next generation. Backes explains that her son loves M&Ms. "For him M&Ms are a treat—he only gets really good homemade candy, he doesn't get M&Ms."

In addition to the homemade chocolates, the store stocks a selection of bulk candies, lollipops, licorice, and gummy candies, which are especially popular with kids. "Tastes change," says Backes. "Gummies and sours are big." While she doesn't care for some of the new varieties, she says, "We have fun finding good quality, beautiful, interesting candies."

Grissmer and Backes split the responsibilities of running the shop, so that each can spend time with their two children. "I really do more of the candy-making," Grissmer explains, "and Debbie basically does everything else."

"That's not really true," Backes corrects. "I do everything else in terms of the retail...But he definitely does a lot of the business, dealing with vendors, and bills, and advertising." Though she concedes, "He'd rather be working with those machines, he's very excited about that."

The division obviously suits them, as Backes says she likes working with customers. "I like the holidays; I like when we're busy." On the other hand, Grissmer looks forward to the holiday-free summer, when he can concentrate on experimentation. "You can take your time and fool around with different ideas. There's a new peanut center that I want to try to make, and I haven't had a chance to do anything with it. I figure this summer I'll work on that."

Mike and Debbie live near the store, and their oldest son started kindergarten in Ridgefield last fall. "We love the town," says Backes. "We're happy with our choice, and you really get to know people in town." And people in town have gotten to know Deborah Ann's chocolates. "We have people who know what they want now, so people come in and just order their favorites."

Grissmer and Backes have been using their business to help with community fundraisers. They recently created a catalog of chocolate specialties for an elementary school chocolate sale, and they raffled off a three-foot-tall, fifteen-pound chocolate Easter bunny to benefit a local animal shelter.

Maybe a chocolate store is a good venue to study the better part of human nature. Says Debbie, "We do a big gift business. People buy more chocolate for somebody else than they would buy and eat themselves." Mike adds, "People come in and they're in a good mood. Every now and then you have someone who's not in a good mood—usually they'll leave in a good mood."

Grissmer and Backes realized one aspect of the original conception of Deborah Ann's recently when they convinced Backes's mother to join them in the business. She now works in the store's open kitchen, making molded chocolates, fudge, and other treats. It's almost how Backes imagined it years before, the difference being that there isn't a glass wall between the customers and the kitchen, since health codes don't require it.

However, Backes and Grissmer sacrificed another part of the original vision to necessity in the last year. When they opened, they had all their candy-making equipment on the premises, but they moved some of the largest machines to a new factory space in Brookfield, Connecticut.

Mike Grissmer '93 and Debbie Backes '92 stand at the counter of Deborah Ann's Homemade Chocolates—ready for the next customer.

This Easter proved the advantage of having an off-site factory. Backes says, "At Easter we had lines out the door." In past years they hadn't been able to make candy in the store during busy times. "You can't be making stuff, when people are asking, 'Why aren't you helping me?'" But this year the factory kept whirring away, and every evening there was a fresh delivery of candy, including, of course, heaps of chocolate bunnies.

Grissmer and Backes hope the factory will be the first step in an expansion of their business. It has nearly four times the production space of their store, and it's all on a bigger scale—giant drums, industrial-scale mixing machines, and a twin pair of enrobers that stretch thirty-five feet across the main room of the factory. Run at maximum efficiency, the machines can produce a few hundred pounds of chocolate an hour. There's also a room dedicated to packaging and shipping and space for warehousing.

Grissmer says, "When we first opened, we really wanted to take it slow and spend time with the kids, develop the recipes, and then, when we felt like we were ready, really start to grow. And so we're kind of there now." They've begun selling their chocolates wholesale and on the web (through *www.deborahanns.com*) and are looking to expand their corporate gift business.

Next year, when the holidays rush up one after another, Deborah Ann's Homemade Chocolates will have more than enough chocolates ready and, hopefully, after a summer of experimentation, some new creations on offer.

But, even if the business expands as much as they hope it will, some things remain beyond their realistic plans. Peanut butter cups, for instance. Grissmer gave up on making his own peanut butter cups after finding the intricate process of first molding chocolate shells, filling them with peanut butter, then topping them, too inefficient. "I have since learned that the way people generally make peanut butter cups is with a very cool-sounding machine... What it does is, from one vat, it takes liquid peanut butter, your center, then from another vat, it takes the chocolate. And then it combines them inside the pump and pumps them out in the exact same time, so that you get the chocolate coming out on the bottom, the peanut butter in the middle, and then chocolate on the top." He makes an airy peanut butter cup between his hands. "After you spend hours making these peanut butter cups, the idea that you can get a machine with the timing so perfect—"

Debbie walks by and interrupts him, with what sounds like a practiced refusal: "We're not getting it."

"No, there's no way we're getting that," Mike admits. "But the idea that you can get a machine that can do that..." Y