Chocolate à la Vietnamese

Truffles with a South Asian accent

It's a Saturday night in San Francisco. Time feels tight for Susan Lieu ’07 and her older sister, Wendy, founders of Sôcôla Chocolatier. (Sôcôla, from the French chocolat, means “chocolate” in Vietnamese.) They must make 1,200 more truffles—pear pâte de fruit, yuzu ginger, jasmine tea, and burnt caramel with red Hawaiian sea salt. What sets the sisters’ confections apart are their inventive Eastern- and Western-inspired flavors, perfected confection, and playful packaging. These truffles—some with sassy names like Give It To Me Guava and Notorious H.O.G. (a play on the stage name of the late rapper The Notorious B.I.G.)—are tantalizing taste buds and winning prizes. Sôcôla (www.socolachocolates.com)

exploring the striking differences and unexpected similarities between East Asian and European medicine

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left: shigehisa kuriyama, reischauer institute professor of cultural history
began in 2001 as a teenagers’ side business in a farmers’ market booth. This year, it took 10 awards at the San Francisco International Chocolate Salon, including a second place for “Most Exciting Experience.” They’ve supplied truffles for Google, Chevron, Pixar, and CBS, as well as San Francisco’s Asian Art Museum, and have 11 retail vendors ($25 for a 12-piece box). “We have the go-ahead to do 26 additional stores in northern California,” says Susan. “Are we doing it? No. I’m doing a full-time Coro Fellowship. My sister has a full-time job.”

Even so, with only a few basic ingredients—chocolate, butter, cream, and a given batch’s special flavor, such as guava—they find time to create truffles for all tastes. Environmentally conscious food producers, they curb their greenhouse-gas emissions by buying locally produced, organic ingredients whenever possible. They use E. Guittard’s 72 percent dark chocolate: “It’s local, family owned and operated, and it has a rich chocolate taste that doesn’t overpower other flavors,” says Susan. The sisters always follow Wendy’s time-tested confectionary regimen: smooth, dense, creamy ganache coated in a shiny dark chocolate shell.

The flavors come from travels, experiences, Wendy’s dreams.
Montage

tea leaves away from the heat. Straining, re-boiling, pouring into melted chocolate, and adding butter follow, as do refrigerating, spreading, dipping, and garnishing.

The flavors come from travels, experiences, Wendy’s dreams, “and just what we’re into,” says Susan. “Wendy loves stout—bam, it’s in there. Wendy loves bacon, there you go. We drink Vietnamese coffee—it’s in the chocolate.”

By day, Wendy is a management consultant; by night and on weekends, she’s Sôcôla’s self-taught chocolatier. “She gets ganaches right on the first or second try,” says Susan. “That’s brilliant. She’s talented! In Vietnamese, you’d say she’s kéto tay—clever, skillful, and dexterous with her hands. I can’t do that. I hate origami!”

This evening, kitchen conditions are perfect. Wendy’s happy with her ganache—it’s firm, velvety, and the flavor releases on the tongue. The liquid dark chocolate has been tempered just so. The air conditioning keeps their rented kitchen cool for chocolate hardening. Standing opposite one another, the sisters dip ganache squares topped with pear pâte de fruit into dark chocolate and drag it an inch on the parchment-lined tray to lose the excess coating. As they reach for the next one, a long-time assistant applies the garnish—in this case, a cocoa-butter transfer of their trademark, a winged alpaca the sisters call Harriet.

The Lieu sisters’ parents escaped Vietnam by boat after the war and lived...
in refugee camps for two years before starting their own gardening and nail-salon businesses in the Bay Area. After Harvard, Susan worked on a government-run sustainable cocoa development project in Vietnam while staying with family in the Mekong Delta. She returned to San Francisco for her Coro Fellowship (the nonprofit program trains fellows for “effective, ethical leadership in public affairs”)—and with her aunt’s recipe for a Vietnamese dessert, which led to their popular tamarind black sesame truffle.

Susan will soon take over managing Socola’s operations, sales, and marketing full time. She plans to systemize and streamline their production process, and find out if the business is expandable and sustainable enough to support one if not both sisters.

“Sometimes I think, ‘Why am I trying to make chocolate?’” Susan says, pondering what her parents went through for her and her siblings. Upon reflection, she remains committed. “What am I so afraid of? Maybe the world will fall in love with our chocolate,” she says. “It’s fun and delicious. It gets you out of the grind and into the body. If people can give them as gifts, share them around a table, enjoy, be grounded in the moment, and maybe take that feeling somewhere else—I think that’s success.”  ~ELIZA WILMERDING

Noir Romantic
Poet April Bernard samples the air of Keats, Shelley, and James M. Cain.

“O h, I’m a romantic, but a heartbroken romantic—and noir, deeply noir,” says poet April Bernard ’78, with a full-throated laugh. Then she explains: “Noir is romanticism embittered. The life of feeling that has been betrayed leads to the attitude and genre of noir. No one who loves noir is a cynic—cynics never believed in anything in the first place. People who love noir are disillusioned romantics. You couldn’t have Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, and Dashiell Hammett unless you had the Romantics: the belief that feeling is primary and expressing feeling will lead you to spiritual enlightenment. When you find out that it doesn’t, you end up in a place of noir.”

Consider her poem “To the Knife,” in which she mentions Alfred Hitchcock’s 1946 film

“…Notorious, where I discovered myself a long time ago, before I learned the finish of the dance could never be a box-office-pleasing slow dissolve to kissing. No, my dance like theirs properly never ends, it is a danse apache to the death, so much violence to reason in lovers kissing and sighing, because they love because it’s impossible, and pretending a happy ending is just an excuse for more kissing.

This poem, with others in her most recent book, Romanticism (2009), embraces the irrationality of both romanticism and noir: “They are both emotional reactions to the world. Neither is very smart,” she says. Yet, in this collection, her fourth, “The impulse behind the poems is to experience extremities,” she observes. “Shelley wrote, ‘I fall upon the thorns of life; I bleed!’ And I said to myself, ‘Why can’t I say that?’ How do I do that? So I decided to write poems interrogating language, exploring interactivity. I like people to stand on tiptoe when they read my work,” says Bernard. “Not that it’s difficult to understand—but I’m trying to articulate complex ideas and feelings.”