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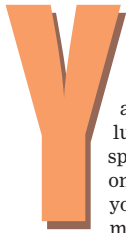
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Consumed with passion

**Gail Ambrosius
puts everything
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By Kent Williams

You may not have noticed, but we are undergoing a chocolate revolution in this country, one that has spread to Madison and, depending on where you live, could overtake your humble abode at any moment. Except, instead of a revolution from below, this is a revolution from above — from Heaven, some would argue.

Good ol' chocolate, which many of us have long associated with Nestlé and Hershey bars, is shedding its proletarian image in favor of an aristocratic refinement — not on every street corner, perhaps, but in enough neighborhoods to make a dent in the \$60 billion chocolate industry. Tired of that brown waxy stuff that passes itself off as chocolate, we've embraced high-end chocolates made with high-end ingredients by revolutionary heroes called chocolatiers.

Vive les chocolatiers!

And long live Gail Ambrosius, Madison's chocolatier par excellence, who's been fighting the good fight since declaring herself open for business in 2004. Now encamped next to the Barrymore Theater on Atwood Avenue, Ambrosius has built up a formidable armada of hand-rolled, hand-dipped, hand-me-one-now chocolates using the finest ingredients money can buy.

But she's also infused her wholesale/retail business with an east-side mentality that seems far removed from the snobby, snooty world of high-end chocolate. No, she didn't purchase her name from a consulting firm, despite how smoothly it rolls off the tongue. She got it the old-fashioned way, from her parents, Ray and Lucille Ambrosius, who owned a dairy farm outside Seymour, up near Green Bay.

And if you close your eyes and concentrate on the flavors while tasting one of Ambrosius' ganaches — the Trois Poivre, say, with its one-two-three punch of black pepper, pink peppercorns and red Syrian pepper — you'll notice that the farm girl hasn't forgotten the lay of the land. She's consumed by what chocolate aficionados call *terroir*, the particular soil from which a particular chocolate is derived. As for fine chocolate, she's been consumed with — and just plain

consuming — it ever since joining her high school French club on a trip to Paris.

How do you keep 'em down on the farm after they've seen Paree? Well, that's a good question, one that I bravely took upon myself to answer. Several thousand calories later, here's what I've learned.

"We left the day after Christmas,"

Ambrosius, now 48, says about her Parisian sojourn, "and when we got there, I was like, 'Oh, my god.'"

Forswearing the traditional culinary whites for jeans and a T-shirt that says "Peace Love Chocolate," Ambrosius is standing in the middle of her store's kitchen, dipping one Maharaja-curry-with-saffron ganache after another into a small vat of thick, luscious chocolate. Some chocolatiers opt for sterile working environments — laboratories, basically. Ambrosius prefers a homier feel. Some of the tempering machines have nicknames — "the Dragon," because it's big and red, "the Poodle," because it's small and white. And what I like best about the place is that, no matter where you look, there's something chocolatey going on.

"Here, try this," Ambrosius says. One of the Maharaja shells has cracked, and I happen to be standing in the right place at the right time. So while I drift off to the Indian subcontinent, Ambrosius resumes her own trip down Memory Lane.

"Anyway, there I was in France," she says, "and this was back when you still had to exchange dollars for francs. One day, the bus stopped in front of this bank where there was a really long line, and when I finally got back out, the bus was gone. They'd left without me! I had a brief moment of panic. Then I was like, 'Hoo-wee! I'm in Paris!'"

"And I went shopping, and I got my hair cut, but I also went to these patisseries, where the pastries were laid out so beautifully. There were chocolates, too — dark chocolates, mostly. And what really caught my attention were the people tasting the chocolates. They were in this blissful state, transported elsewhere."

Transported back to the States, Ambrosius didn't immediately run out and buy all the dark chocolate she could get her hands on, mostly because there wasn't much dark chocolate around at that time. Milk chocolate ruled (and continues to rule) the American palate, with its milky, sugary, vanilla-drenched flavor profile. But

a seed had been planted in Ambrosius' teenage mind, a seed that would grow, over the years, into one of the world's more remarkable plants, *Theobroma cacao*.

Assigned by the great Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus, the name *Theobroma cacao* translates as "chocolate, food of the gods." And I could blow you away with all its mood-enhancing, stress-reducing properties, if you want me to, but let's face it, people, we're not eating chocolate for the antioxidants. We're eating it for its taste.

And it tastes like the blessed ground from which it rises, Mother Nature at her earthiest. Not for nothing was the cocoa bean used as currency among the Mayans and Olmecs and Toltecs and Aztecs, who nurtured the plant for centuries before the Spanish got ahold of it and turned half of Europe into ranting, raving chocoholics.

And if the beans aren't quite worth their weight in gold these days, they're capable of being transmuted into gold through a process not unlike the alchemy of medieval times. Fermenting, drying, roasting, blending, conching, tempering — each stage is crucial. But none of it is going to amount to much if you don't start with the right ingredients.

"My MG&E bills are through the

roof," Ambrosius says while showing me "The Cave," a walk-in cooler next to the kitchen. On the shelves, arranged neatly in rows, are bags and bags of chocolate discs, each bag weighing in at over 10 pounds. These are the building blocks of Ambrosius' confections, and they hail from some of the most exotic locales in the world of chocolate — Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Tanzania, Madagascar and a tiny volcanic island off the eastern coast of Africa, São Tomé. Oh, and France, from which Ambrosius imports Valrhona chocolate, "the gold standard" of the chocolate industry.

Ambrosius prides herself on her use of single-origin chocolates, each with its own particular flavor and mouth feel. But a chocolatier's reputation rises and falls on what he or she does to those base chocolates, the flavor combinations. Yes, the chocolate should be smooth and shiny, which requires care and expertise, but it should also tell a little story, with a beginning and end, maybe even a middle.

Take Ambrosius' cinnamon/cayenne ganache, her personal favorite these days. The base chocolate, from Colombia, hits



you with the taste of coffee, toasted marshmallow, even “a whisper of rose,” according to Ambrosius. Then the spices kick in: the cinnamon, roasted ancho chilies, chipotle and cayenne pepper. That’s a lot to keep track of in a single bite, and I find myself nodding in agreement as Ambrosius coaches me through everything I’m supposedly experiencing. But somehow the flavors resolve themselves. And for such a ball of fire, the ganache is surprisingly delicate.

“I like to keep my flavors rather subtle,” she says, now pouring a batch of freshly blended cardamom-with-orange-blossom ganache onto a sheet of wax paper, then labeling it and dating it. Later, perhaps tomorrow, it’ll be sent through the extruder, then rolled into balls and dipped.

“I don’t want to hit you over the head,” she adds, “but I do want you to swoon. I want your eyes to roll back in their sockets. When I first opened the shop, I thought about putting a fainting sofa out front.”

Instead, what’s out front is a display case that offers a glittering array of deep, dark browns. Some chocolatiers can be quite fastidious about presentation, each piece of chocolate resting on a pillow of crushed velvet, metaphorically speaking. Ambrosius’ are less ostentatious, more approachable. And you can sense a playfulness behind her flavor combinations. (Three peppers?)

Where does she get her ideas?

“Oh, everywhere,” she says. “I’ll be out shopping and notice something, a new spice. Or somebody will bring something by, invite me to give it a try. I’m also a big-time gardener. My whole front yard is a garden. And I’ll pick up a lot of things there — bee balm, for instance. I’ll steep it and see what I get.”

I ask her if she’s ever created a total dud.

“Basil,” she says before I can even get the whole question out. “I love basil, but the basil-flavored chocolate I came up with had a really green taste. It was like eating pesto, instead of eating chocolate. We wasted a few pounds on that one.”

Despite the occasional lapse in taste,

Ambrosius strikes you as the kind of person who never gets around to thinking she might fail, either that or she’s one of those rare people who aren’t afraid to fail, maybe even enjoys it a little.

“I actually like change,” she says. “For me, it’s exciting. I was a single mom when I started this place. I didn’t have any money, and I had to put up my house as collateral to get a loan. But I recently celebrated my third

anniversary in the business. And I now have 10 employees, plus a couple of seasonal employees.”

Virtually all of those employees are women, which sends the faint aroma of estrogen wafting through the kitchen, and everyone seems to get along so well that you start to think you’ve landed in a feminist utopia.

“We’ve had men who worked here before,” Ambrosius says. “My son worked here for a couple of years when he was in high school. The thing is, chocolate tends to be a man’s world. In France, they’re all men, and it’s very competitive over there. But that’s just not me. I’m not very competitive.”

Has being a woman ever gotten in the way?

“Not really,” she says. “The hardest part was when I was first getting started, over on East Wilson. The construction workers I hired were like, ‘Oh, isn’t that cute? She’s going to make candy.’ They just assumed I had a wealthy husband or something, which drove me crazy.”

For the record, Ambrosius hasn’t had a husband for a number of years, and her son, Isaac, is now studying political science at the UW. But it was another political type, Gov. James Doyle, who got Ambrosius into the chocolate business.

“He was running on the pledge to lay off state employees,” she says, “and although I’d been working at the DNR [as a cartographer and IT specialist] for 10 years at that point, I thought I might be vulnerable. So I asked my boss if she would please tell me if I was on the list, and she said I was. In fact, I was one of the first to be let go, but by that time I was testing recipes and bringing in samples for my co-workers to try. People love being guinea pigs for that kind of thing.”

Formal training was more difficult to come by.

“I looked around, and pastry school seemed like the only option,” she says. “But I finally found something called Ecole Chocolate, an intensive three-month online course where you do all these experiments on your own and send in reports and photographs. Then our instructor took us to France, where we visited a lot of chocolatiers. After that, all I needed was a name. The French tend to use their own names, but there was already an Ambrosia Chocolates in Milwaukee, and I was afraid of getting sued. But a lawyer I had look into it said he didn’t think it was a problem, and Gail Ambrosius Chocolates was born.”

Three years later, the business is still growing by leaps and bounds, but Ambrosius doesn’t expect to be leaving the Schenk’s Atwood neighborhood anytime soon, if ever.

“I moved to Madison on my 18th birthday,” she says, “and I’ve lived on the east side the whole time. It was important to me that I be able to walk to work, but this is just a great location anyway. I’ll see people drive by and slow way down, peering in the window. Then they pull their car over, park and come on in. I love that.”

Any expansion plans?

“I’ve thought about opening other outlets,” she says, “maybe even in other cities. I’ve also thought about opening an after-hours bar devoted to chocolate. But most of my thinking goes into developing new products. I’m working on a couple of trail mixes, one with cashews, pecans, dried cherries and São Tomé chocolate, the other with toasted pumpkin seeds, cranberries, candied ginger and chocolate-covered cocoa nibs. I’m doing a peppermint ganache for Christmas, also a cranberry ganache. And I’m looking into doing a bottled chocolate sauce, which would be a way of lengthening the shelf life of what I sell. But mostly I’m just trying to put good flavors out there, give people something to savor.”

“Mission accomplished,” I want to say, but Ambrosius has just handed me a chai ganache, and I plop it in my mouth before she has a chance to change her mind. She’s been handing me ganaches since I got here, and whatever journalistic integrity I brought with me has now been drowned in chocolate. We’ll chalk it up to research. But it makes me wonder about Ambrosius’ own research methods.

“I have to taste everything while it’s being made,” she says. “And I usually go out in front and taste four or five things off the cart, just to make sure they’re holding up. But I don’t have to eat the whole thing. One bite and I know.”

That’s the difference between her and me. One bite and all I know is that I want another bite. I ask her how she’s managed to maintain her girlish figure while supplying Madison with thousands upon thousands of bon bons.

“Well, I do yoga every morning,” she says, “and I bike in the summer. Plus, I’m flying around here like crazy all day. But one of the wonderful things about good chocolate is that it doesn’t take much. A little goes a long way. In my opinion, chocolate is its own food group. It’s not a fruit. It’s not a vegetable. It’s...it’s...”

“The food of the gods?” I ask.

“Exactly.” ♦

