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 Gail Ambrosius
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Sharing the Love

The recipe to **chocolatier Gail Ambrosius'** success, Jill Nebeker finds, comes from caring as much for her team as she does her customers and chocolates.

Gail Ambrosius admits that she often wonders, "How did this happen?" In five short years she went from being laid off to owning an award-winning artisanal chocolate shop. What's her recipe? Take one part intuition and art, one part discipline and business sense, add a dash of curiosity, and top with love.

Gail owns *Gail Ambrosius ~ Chocolatier*, on Madison's Atwood Avenue. Her charming and airy shop, decorated in light greens offset by deep browns, is dedicated to one thing: Really delicious chocolate. But before the shop became a reality and Madison came to adore this east-side treasure, Gail did more than learn to make chocolate, she learned how to build a business.

Laid off from her job as a cartographer at the Department of Natural Resources in 2003, Gail did some soul-searching and decided to devote her immediate future to chocolate. A risky undertaking, Gail has made it work and here's how: During that first year, she took an online class in chocolate-making. She took business classes. She studied chocolate-making in France. She recounts, "Every day I did something about chocolate. I would look into distributors, box-makers, everything. I did that and yoga."

When she wasn't doing all things chocolate, she was working at The Soap Opera, a job she'd had as a UW undergraduate in the 1980s. She credits Chuck Bauer and Chuck Beckwith, owners of The Soap Opera, with much more than a part-time job. They also helped her to develop a business philosophy. She says, "They have a business model founded on an organic approach. You go slowly, do things only when they seem to happen naturally. It's worked for them." And if the awards, popularity, and growth of *Gail Ambrosius ~ Chocolatier* are any indication, the approach is working for Gail, too.

Gail's first shop, a small affair with a short counter and a narrow strip of kitchen space, opened in 2004. She says, "At the time, I had no idea. I thought it was just going to be me. I wondered, 'Do I even need 600 square feet?'" It took less than two years for her to outgrow that space. Now with a larger shop on a well-trafficked street, she employs ten people and has an e-commerce business that is taking off.

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Not surprisingly, Gail takes care in how she manages her staff. She offers health insurance, chocolate tastings, weekly potluck lunches, and perks such as a community supported agriculture share. The love of the place comes through when you visit the store. Staff members are patient to explain the difference in cacao percentages, and they never rush you as you pick out the perfect dozen. Gail says, "We have an intention of what's going to happen when the chocolate leaves the store. It makes people happy. I love thinking about all the boxes that are being opened, especially on Valentine's Day."

And the chocolate? Take even a small bite and your mouth will ache with delight. When you think you can't take it any more, a light wave of orange liqueur or vanilla or jasmine will save you. Then you'll smile and want another taste. Gail says, "I have high standards. I don't compromise on things. I taste and then I buy on flavor. It's not about cost." Even though the Costa Rican organic chocolate goes for \$16 per pound, she uses it because "I think people can tell the difference."

Gail is the type of person who needs a challenge. Chocolate, it turns out, is the perfect medium for her. She explains, "Each chocolate has its own personality. Humidity or other factors also change it. It's fascinating." Growing up, Gail had always been good in the kitchen, learning from her mother, who didn't use recipes and cooked for their family of ten children. Gail's eyes widen and she smiles as she remembers, "Chocolate was the special thing you got to make at the holidays." Like her mother, she is an experimenter in the kitchen, so the fact that chocolate is fickle only adds to her gratification. She says, "It's never the same. It even tastes different each day."

Gail wants to know everything about chocolate: the varieties, the growing, the harvesting, the drying. She has started traveling to various parts of the world to see, not only how cacao is grown and harvested but also who is doing the work. She says, "I want to know who the farmers are, how they are treated, who their families are." She has a trip in the works to stay with a family that farms cacao. What's next? She isn't sure, but she does mention the idea of producing chocolate. She says, "There are only about a dozen chocolate producers in the U.S., and they are all men. I would love to become the first woman." ■

Jill Nebeker is a web editor at a Madison-based magazine publisher. You can find more of her writing on dane101.com and some of her web design at small-potatoes.net.

Realizing a Dream

- **November 21, 2004**
Open for Business.
- **Spring 2005**
Hired first employee.
- **September 2006**
Moved to space on Atwood Avenue.
- **May 2007**
Wisconsin Winner, Count Me In Campaign.
- **JUNE 2007**
Won Dane County Small Business Award.
- **JANUARY 2008**
Partnered with Goodman Community Center Fundraising.
- **OCTOBER 2008**
Winner, "Best Bar" Next Generation Chocolatier competition.
- **BEST OF MADISON**
2006, 2007, 2008
- **MADISON'S FAVORITE'S**
2007, 2008

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- Bayview Neighborhood Center • Boys & Girls Club of Dane County
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- Lussier Teen Center • Neighborhood House • Northport Apartments Community Center • Vera Court, Neighborhood Center
- Warner Park Community Recreation Center
- Wil-Mar Neighborhood Center • Wisconsin Youth & Family Center
- South Madison Health & Family Center-Harambee

