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cutting-edge
chocolatiers



Artisanal Chocolatiers (l. to r.) :
Christian Alexandre and Whajung Park, L'Artisan du Chocolat;
William Dean Brown, William & Dean;
Michael and Richard Antonorsi, Chuao Chocolatier;
Bill Copeland, Glacier Confection;
and Jonathan Graham, Compartes Chocolatier.

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cutting-edge *chocolatiers*

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...the world's most innovative chocolatiers are pushing the boundaries of what is possible with chocolate. From the use of exotic ingredients to the development of new textures and flavors, these artisans are creating a new generation of chocolate that is both delicious and visually stunning. The result is a chocolate that is truly cutting-edge.

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They may not be making chocolate from bean to bar, but these chocolatiers are passionate about delivering consumers an authentic artisanal experience.

By Bernard Pacyniak

Compartes Chocolates

Compartes has been a Los Angeles tradition for more than 60 years. Founded by Mrs. Comparte in 1950 on the principle of bringing European chocolate techniques, recipes and artistry to the United States, today Compartes continues to appeal to the most discerning chocoholics.

Helmed by chocolate prodigy Jonathan Graham, the company's sophisticated chocolates are still made from scratch daily at its Los Angeles chocolate factory and storefront. Graham, who took over his family's chocolate shop at the young age of 15, had been inhaling and imbibing chocolate since he was three.

At the time Graham took charge, Compartes had already established a reputation for being a superlative chocolate shop, one rooted heavily in tradition. Its chocolate-dipped apricots have been a favorite amongst Brentwood society since the 50s, even supplying Winston Churchill and Marilyn Monroe. Nevertheless, the business was in dire need of some youthful flair.

Inspired by his global trips to places such as Venezuela, Asia, Italy, France and other parts of Europe, Graham began developing his own recipes at the Compartes chocolate factory. Mixing all-natural ingredients and exotic flavors together, Graham uses ganache as his canvas creating unique flavor profiles with the purpose of revealing chocolate's many different notes.

"With my taking over Compartes, I decided pretty much to keep the name

and redo everything else from the ground up," explains Graham. "I changed all the ingredients to use extremely high-quality ingredients, no preservatives, organics and locally sourced fruits. These changes made the chocolates much healthier by the quality of what goes in them.

"We offer our stuffed fruits as well, which are a really interesting combination of fruits and nuts with no chocolate that taste amazing," he adds.

"They are a confection in itself with no added sugars or chocolate, so it's super healthy."

In addition, Graham uses all organic ingredients in producing the Compartes' truffles and chocolate bars. He also uses various single-origin chocolates with high cacao percentages, depending upon the particular item.

"The response to all of these changes has been amazing, people really value and appreciate the handmade confections and the quality," he says. "Our business has actually not been hurt by the economy, which is amazing and I am so grateful and thankful for that.

In fact, it is continually growing year by year. I think in this day and age where people don't want to spend on huge luxury purchases — gourmet chocolate serves as a little luxury that everyone can afford."

Graham's creativity has certainly captured the attention of Los Angeles' most famous neighborhood, Hollywood.

Jonathan Graham of Compartes Chocolates favors organic components, locally sourced fruits and multi-dimensional flavor profiles, such as raspberry and pink pepper.



From high profile events such as the Golden Globes and Academy Awards to gatherings for Marcia Cross, including her wedding and Emmy parties, “chocolate boy” (a nickname Teri Hatcher gave him) has become the “chocolatier to the stars.”

What’s Graham’s secret?

“I love blending different herbs, spices and exotic fruits together to create my truffles and chocolate bars,” he says. “I love flavor profiles that are multi-dimensional, meaning not just a plain raspberry truffle but with additional elements like raspberry and rose or raspberry and pink pepper. Once the person eating the chocolate gets all these other flavors mixed in, it adds to the experience of the chocolate.”

Come this fall, Compartes will launch its products wholesale.

As Graham explains, “This is a very big step for my business, making everything fresh from scratch in our kitchens, it’s going to be really exciting and brings a whole new chapter to Compartes to stores nationwide and I am so excited about it!”

ChuaO Chocolates

Founded in 2002 by brothers Michael and Richard Antonorsi, master chef and ceo, respectively, ChuaO Chocolatier has pioneered “fusion chocolate” through a blend of premium chocolate and fresh natural ingredients.

The Venezuelan-born brothers, now San Diego residents, named the company ChuaO Chocolatier after the legendary cacao-producing region of ChuaO, located in central Venezuela. The Antonorsis’ decision was a reflection of their commitment to both high quality and their Venezuelan family heritage. Chocolate is part of their roots, as their ancestors once ran a small family farm that was an important part of the criollo cacao plantation industry.

Initially, the company started with a single boutique in Encinitas, Calif. featuring a one-of-a-kind confectionery menu of chocolate bars, bonbons, truffles and hot chocolate. Their signature flavor was Spicy Maya, a modern twist on the Mayan’s ancient hot chocolate recipe made with pasilla chile and cayenne pepper. The Spicy Maya

flavor has since been extended into a chocolate bar, the company’s ChocoPod product, rolled almonds and gelato.

“Our mission is to arouse your senses with unusual, unexpected and delicious

chocolate experiences,” says Michael Antonorsi. “We are always looking for new experiences and new delicious surprises to do just that. I am currently on a trip to Europe and Africa right now, tasting my way through each city and being inspired by the sounds, the smells and the foods.”

As Antonorsi notes, “We prefer to set trends rather than follow them. The Firecracker [a chipotle caramel fudge truffle with popping candy, a hint of salt, and dark chocolate] is a perfect example of that and I think that the Potato Chips in Chocolate bar create a very loyal following as well. Consumers love chocolate with spice or salt, so we like to play in that space, but are always adding our own twist.”

Another example of the company’s exotic flavor combinations is its Pan Con Chocolate, a dark chocolate bonbon filled with roasted Panko bread crumbs and olive oil ganache with a touch of sea salt.

Although the company now owns and operates, three chocolate cafes — the menu includes numerous hot chocolate beverages, pastries, gelatos and decadent seasonal creations— in San Diego county, Antonorsi points out that consumers don’t “feel as rich and generous as they once did and have become cautious...Even during hard economic times, people still want to indulge and reward themselves.

“So, instead of going out for a lavish dinner, they may cook at home and treat themselves to gourmet chocolate for dessert,” he continues. “Many people ‘traded up’ from their old standby candy bar to something more decadent and now they are hooked. Once you experience fine chocolate, it’s hard to go back to the other stuff and so they continue to indulge. So, we are seeing sales slowly increase again as people find more stability.”



Having embraced “fusion chocolate,” Brothers Michael (left) and Richard Antonorsi seek to arouse the senses with “unusual, unexpected and delicious chocolate experiences” such as Potato Chips in Chocolate and Firecracker (a chipotle caramel fudge truffle with popping candy, a hint of salt and dark chocolate).

William Dean Chocolates,

William Dean Brown, founder and chief chocolate officer at William Dean Chocolates in Largo, Fla., began exploring his artistic talents at an early age. In elementary school, his artistic passion was so great that teachers had to remove all the paper from his desk as he would constantly draw.

At one point, he was caught sketching on hand towels from the restroom and sent to the principal's office to be reprimanded. He stopped drawing at this point, and it would be years before he found a new medium.

Although trained as an educator, William became involved in the dot.com world. He co-founded a software company and later joined an emerging technology company. After the dot.com bubble burst, he reinvented himself by moving to Tampa Bay. He joined a large, mature company and worked his way into upper management.

After watching an episode on "The Food Network," he made truffles for his employees as a staff support activity. He later saw the work of "artisan" chocolatiers and knew he had found the perfect medium to express his creativity.

As Brown learned to airbrush and paint chocolates, the artistic passion from his youth returned. Artisan chocolates offered a multi-dimensional palette: the opportunity to create a beautiful, outward appearance for the shell with amazing flavor combinations hidden within.

At the same time, Brown recognizes the ongoing trend toward healthy.

"We are and always will be at our core artisanal chocolates and that means no preservatives and fresh ingredients, which does help answer the healthier foods mandate," he explains. "We won't compromise what it takes to achieve what we feel is the best way to make chocolates, following the traditions of the great chocolatiers. So we will continue to use cream, butter and other foods that may not appear on a "healthy" list.

"We do believe though that moderation is the answer and not changing what works," Brown emphasizes. "We

have added a new product, our granola bars, which have many healthy benefits and include oats, flaxseed and wheat germ in addition to nuts and dried fruits. It is probably the hottest thing in our store right now. I even had a chocolatier from France in the store who asked for the recipe."

Although he's officially been in the chocolate business only two years, having opened William Dean Chocolate in 2008, Brown has captured the eye and acclaim from many, including a slew of gold medals from the most recent International Salon competitions in Las Vegas, Chicago and Boston.

Business has been growing steadily, despite the recession and gradual recovery.

"We've been very fortunate in the past recession as our business has continued to grow," he says. Although the current economic situation is a "big concern," Brown believes that artisanal chocolates fall into an "affordable luxury" category.

"While people have had to cut spending on cars, housing, vacation and other expensive items, we still can be a way to treat yourself or a friend in a way that feels special," he says.

A pending move for Brown supports the notion. This month, the company will relocate to the "best retail location" in the area, expanding their facility significantly.

"We will have about four-to-five times the space and will be adding artisan gelato/sorbet and French macaroons and some other pastries," he says. "Our 'Chocolate Lab' will have glass windows across the entire front so customers can watch from outside. We will be able to offer classes and corporate training, which I think will be fun. We are hoping to have the construction finished by the end of

William Dean Brown of William Dean Chocolates combines his artistic skills with classic traditions to create beautiful and flavorful chocolates and confections.



September/early October, but that is always a moving target. I'm adding two to three pastry chefs/chocolatiers, so it will be a significant growth for us."

Brown is also now appearing on Home Shopping Network as an artisanal chocolatier, which he says has been a lot of fun.

"We've started last spring and look forward to some big shows this fall [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ClezurIC0-U]," he says. "It's been a lot of fun so far. We will offer more products as we are able to increase production."

L'Artisan du Chocolat

L' Artisan du Chocolat had its roots as a husband-and-wife operation going back to 2001. Christian Alexandre, a former banker, financial planner, economics professor as well as mayor of a small town in France, had discovered that his wife, Whajung Park, had trained as a chocolatier in her youth.

Whajung, Maitre Chocolatier, has been trained in Paris at the renown Ecole Superieure de Cuisine Jean Ferrandi and has been working with some of the most qualified "Confiseur" and chocolate makers in Paris such as Alain Furet.

That discovery led to making chocolates first for friends, which eventually evolved into supplying a small retail outlet named Picholine that sold a broad range of French gourmet foods. By 2003, L'Artisan du Chocolate had incorporated and – as fate would have it – actually took over the same retail location where Picholine once existed.

From the very beginning, L' Artisan du Chocolat focused on making chocolate the traditional French way: no preservatives and less sugar.

In addition to a broad range of classic chocolates, Park has developed an upscale and "avant-garde" collection, which features flavors such as Greek kalamata olive, bacon, Korean garlic and Japanese red bean.

Today, L'Artisan du Chocolat operates a second retail outlet in Santa Monica, Calif., which opened last May with the help of an investor. But

as Alexandre points out, the most recent recession and painfully slow recovery has had an impact on the business.

"Since 2008, we didn't lose any individual clients, but have seen a drop in corporate clients," he says. "Some of those corporate clients went belly up, others have reduced expenses."

Interestingly, the loss of past corporate clients has been offset by the addition of new ones, mostly from Europe who have business in the United States, Alexandre explains.

He also credits his wife, Park, with being able to combine her classic training and exposure to Asian flavors and cuisine as critical to keeping the company's range of chocolates both classic and contemporary.

He cites flavor combinations such as mango/wasabi, curry/kiwi, anis/honey, shitake and cucumber/vodka as examples of Park's creativity and sensibility.

"There's a growing sophistication in consumer tastes in America; it's constantly moving forward," he says. Alexandre points out that there was a point when milk chocolate accounted for more than two-thirds of all sales.

When word came out about dark chocolate's healthy characteristics, there was a

huge shift to where 75% of all chocolates sold were dark.

"In the last two years, we've seen a more balanced approach, a return to milk chocolate as consumers become more educated," he says. Of course, L'Artisan du Chocolate uses a 40% cocoa content milk chocolate, which undoubtedly contributes to the resurgence.

Glacier Confection

It began as a way to raise support and funds for our "Fallen Heroes and their families." As the company's website states: "Glacier Confection is dedicated to a shared future with shared benefits for our U.S. Troops and their families. We are committed to making a difference in the lives of these families who have sacrificed much for their love of country."

To that end, the company is also involved with the Folds of Honor Foundation (www.foldsofhonor.com), a charitable organization formed to provide post-secondary educational scholarships and support to the spouses and children of service members disabled or killed in serving their country.

Last year, Glacier Confection provided those participating in the Patriot Cup (www.thepatriotcup.com), an annual fundraising event linked with the Folds of Honor Foundation and held in Tulsa at The Patriot golf course, with Patriot truffles.

But founder Bill Copeland recognizes that Glacier Confection goes well beyond a fundraising operation. It's all about the chocolate and creative choices.

"We push to innovate with unique flavor combinations and designer packaging products," he explains. "We need to give our clients a reason to choose chocolate as a gift. Presentation is critical along with the highest level of customer service possible. We all desire to be treated special and to treasure our experiences."

Most recently, the company has begun making chocolate with Fortunato No. 4 Nacional cocoa beans, beans that many in the industry believed had become extinct.



Husband-and-wife team Christian Alexandre and Whajung Park of L'Artisan du Chocolate focus on traditional French chocolates techniques. Nevertheless, Park also offers avant-garde Asia flavors, such as Korean garlic and Japanese red bean, for customers seeking new experiences.

Unlike most cocoa beans, whereby conching ranges from 12 to 16 hours, the Fortuna-to No. 4 Nacional bean undergoes 60 hours of conching.

Owner and chocolatier Copeland says the long conching time brings out the flavor of the bean, floral and fruity, as well as helps make it "buttery smooth."

In addition to offering this truly special chocolate — the only chocolatier in the United States to do so — Glacier Chocolate has a full complement of artistically designed pralines, truffles, toffees, turtles, caramels and barks.

"We offer unique product combination, such as exotic spices paired with single origin chocolate," he says. The company also conducts cheese and chocolate pairings, wine and chocolate pairings, gluten free and vegan offerings, all in an effort to attract the broadest range of chocolate-lovers possible.

"In addition, we communicate extensively via the web to our client base," Copeland emphasizes. "This two-way communication link allows direct input into product development and suggestions on how we can be a better provider of services. We strive to involve our clients to the point of partnering with us. This is their chocolate shop."

What does the future hold?

All of the chocolatiers referenced here had opinions about the future of artisanal chocolate sector in the United States. For Antonorsi, the company's growth depends on leveraging logistics.

"The biggest challenge is to adapt an artisan product to an industrial distribution system," he says. "There is great opportunity for the distribution system to change and adopt artisan products.

"We also find that the average consumer thinks of bonbons and truffles as gifts, but feels guilty buying for him- or herself. It is our job to give them permission, to remind them that they deserve to indulge. Hopefully, over time their mentality will change and they will embrace the self gift."



Chocolatier Bill Copeland of Glacier Confection offers customers unique product combinations, often pairing exotic spices with single-origin chocolates. Examples (pictured) of truffle offerings include Mojito Mint, Panna Cotta, Rainbow Sherbert, Banana Split and Dark Kalua.

Brown foresees continued growth, although he acknowledges "there have been many casualties as well of really talented artisanal chocolatiers. I really do believe we are in an era in artisanal chocolates similar to the era that wine and coffee in the United States experienced where they became on par with the products in Europe.

"I think the biggest challenge is staying true to our artisanal roots of no preservatives and making things in small batches," he continues. "I also think the price of chocolate could become a challenge from a financial standpoint."

Alexandre also sees the growth of artisanal chocolate sector. He looks to introduce a line of chocolate bars in the coming weeks. But like Brown, he's also seen several chocolatiers close their doors.

"Chocolate isn't an easy product; it's hard to manufacture, hard to store and hard to sell," he says. "The economy and the amount of discretionary income chocolate lovers have will play a critical role in determining to what extent the artisanal chocolate sector will develop," he adds.

Grahm remains optimistic about the future.

"I definitely see a continued growth for artisan chocolatiers in the U.S.," he says. "I find that my business has been growing a lot and I think it's only going to go up from here, I think the American public really has become aware of the value of good quality goods; they are embracing locally made products, organic products, eco-friendliness and going back to the tradition of handmade goods.

"The day-and-age of The Big Name chain stores trying to create 'artisan-like' chocolate products has come to an end."

That belief is partly what's motivating him to launch a wholesale line.

"For years I have had people wanting to carry my products in their stores but I didn't feel I was ready; I have now made the decision to go for it since I am ready with my chocolate and production," Grahm says. "I just can't wait for more people all across the country to be able to experience my unique chocolates in their local stores and be able to bring this idea of interesting, fun, high-end chocolate to the masses."

Continued growth is also what Copeland foresees for the artisanal chocolate segment in the United States.

"We see this as the largest growth segment in the industry," he asserts. "While we do not see this artisanal market as a mass market driver, we believe it will be around for a long time, providing the best products in the world, to the most discriminating buyer.

"Today young and old alike want to know where their food is coming from," Copeland points out "They want to share their finds and stories with their friends.

"In this social media frenzy you can impact your clients immediately with what you say and do. Social and environmental responsibility is something we take very seriously. We are embedded in our community and this is where we love being, with the people!"

In a way, that's what artisanal is all about — being intimately connected to the customer through chocolate. When one observes all the disconnections in society, having such an artisanal app makes all the sense in the world. ☺