



# A Sweet Treat

*By Debby Schoeningh*

**L**ike a painter at the easel, Marie Watson takes brush in hand and gently sweeps a rich, dark brown color from her unconventional pallet, a large plastic bowl.

She makes two deft strokes with the brush, forming a three-dimensional half circle that will be the beginning layer of her creation.

When finished, Marie's art won't hang on a wall, and it won't be displayed on a shelf for more than a day or two, because her art is to be eaten. Her choice of medium is chocolate, and her canvas is a truffle mold.

Marie is a chocolatier—an artist of sweet confections.

Marie and her husband, John, opened Prospectors Chocolate Co. & Bistro in Baker City last May.

On this day, Marie is making dark chocolate truffles filled with ganache, which is melted chocolate and cream, and flavored with Grand

## *Handmade chocolates just in time for Valentine's Day*

Marnier, an orange liqueur.

Once Marie fills the brushed chocolate truffle shells, they are ready for yet another layer of chocolate to seal the bottom, completely encasing the soft ganache in a hard, glossy outer coating.

Marie says tempering the chocolate for the outside shell of the truffle is the trickiest part of making truffles. The process involves heating the chocolate to 113 F to melt the cocoa butter crystals. The chocolate is cooled to about 80 F, and then reheated again to about 88° F.

The tempering process is what gives chocolate its uniform sheen and crisp bite.

"When it's not done properly,

the chocolate will turn white, called blooming, or get streaks," says Marie. "On hot summer days, it's difficult to get the chocolate to temper, and if it's too cold, the chocolate sets too quickly."

Agitating the chocolate is an important part of the tempering process. As Marie stirs the creamy mixture, a wave of chocolate rises to the rim of the bowl, releasing a tablespoon-size dollop that lands on her pant leg.

These days, she admits she wears more chocolate than she eats.

"They have machines that will do all of this," Marie says. "I'm like the Wilma Flintstone of chocolate making."

She says she handcrafts the chocolates because the flavor is better.

Marie got her start as a chocolatier more than 20 years ago, after taking a class in chocolate making.

She graduated from making holiday treats for family members to



*Above, Marie Watson fills truffle molds with ganache. Below right, her husband, John, brings more molds for Marie to fill. Opposite page, a velvet heart box filled with truffles makes a great Valentine gift.*

opening a business called “Heavenly Chocolates” with a friend in Spokane, Washington.

One of their specialties was chocolate-dipped potato chips, which she still makes at Prospectors Chocolate. The challenge, Marie says, is getting people to try them.

“Once they get over the idea that potato chips and chocolate don’t go together, most people really like them,” she says.

Although Marie is the main candy chef, John dips a mean potato chip and helps in the kitchen where he can.

After working with and around chocolate almost every day, John still enjoys an occasional truffle, but says he has finally gotten over the childhood thrill of getting to “lick the bowl clean.”

John and Marie use what they feel is the world’s best chocolate, 11-pound bricks of raw Callebaut (cal-luh-bo) imported from Belgium.

All of their ingredients are fresh. Because they do not add preservatives, you can only extend Prospectors Chocolates’ shelf life with refrigeration. However, Marie says that has not been a problem.

“Most of the time when we ask

customers if they want their truffle put in a bag, they opt to have us put it in their hand, so they can eat it on their way out the door,” she says.

Their most popular candy is the cayenne-spiced truffle with a spice-sprinkled dark chocolate shell, and a soft chocolate ganache center.

Truffles in Irish cream, Frangelico (liqueur), butter creams, coconut, cherry, lemon and vanilla also are available. Other confections include walnut fudge, soft peanut brittle and chocolate desserts.

During the Christmas rush they were going through 60 pounds of raw chocolate a week. Now they are gearing up for another important candy holiday: Valentine’s Day.

After taking some time off to travel this winter, Prospectors Chocolate will reopen February 6 to prepare their special red velvet hearts in ½-pound (\$12.50) and 1-pound (\$25) boxes of assorted truffles.

With a little red wine, John says this is the perfect gift for your Valentine.

He says dark chocolates are especially good to give on Valentine’s Day, because they release more of the cocoa butter’s “love” endorphins.

For a romantic pre-truffle dinner, Prospectors Chocolate also has intimate seating for 15. Marie creates pasta, quiche dishes and other gourmet delicacies for lunch and dinner.

Since a lot of their entrees are not traditional American fare, they make the dishes ahead of time and display them in a deli case so people can view them before ordering.

The couple manage and operate the business with no employees. Marie gained restaurant experience as manager of Red Lobster in Tacoma, Washington, for 11 years.

John says his retail management at Albertsons and his government computer desk job did not prepare him for the fast pace of a restaurant.

“I’m getting used to it now,” he says, “but it was difficult learning to juggle everything at once—cooking, washing dishes, waiting tables. Every once in a while I would have to go into the kitchen and tell Marie, ‘I’m having a moment.’”

Marie jokes that at times John has been more challenging than all 90 of the employees she used to manage at Red Lobster. But for the most part, she says, “He’s a pretty good Oompah Loompah (a worker in the fictional Willy Wonka Chocolate Factory movie).”

Aside from breaking into the occasional “oompah loompah doompety doo” song, John now appears to be as steady and reliable as their trademark wooden prospector, which sits outside the restaurant greeting customers.

“We’re not here to get rich,” says John. “We started this business because we wanted to spend more time together and enjoy ourselves now that our kids are raised.”

“Be careful what you say,” jokes Marie about spending more time together, “or your wish may come true.”

“This has been a real labor of love,” John says, as he plunks the last truffle into the red heart-shaped box and hands it to her.

The same sentiments expressed on Valentine’s Day are contained in each box of Prospectors Chocolates. ■



*Prospectors Chocolate Co. & Bistro is located at 1917 Court Ave. in Baker City, and can be reached at (541) 523-9211. They will ship chocolates, by request.*