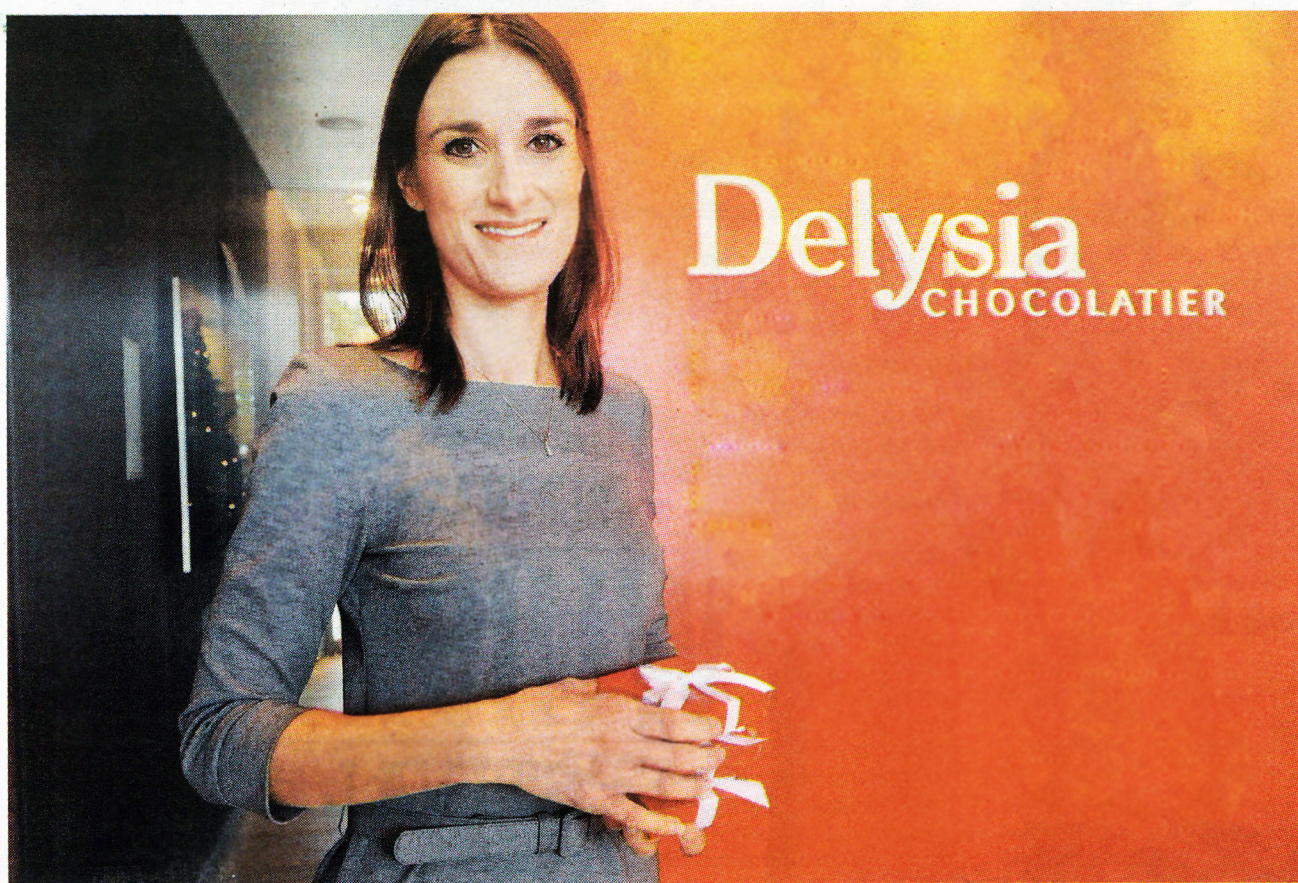


THE AUSTIN CHRONICLE



PHOTOS BY JOHN ANDERSON

The Bitter and the Sweet

How Delysia Chocolatier built their brand

BY VIRGINIA B. WOOD

A year before Nicole Patel finally opened the chocolate factory of her dreams, she found herself sitting on the floor of an unfinished 2,000-square-foot space sobbing. Patel and her husband had purchased two contiguous condos in a rural northwest Travis County business park in which to create a workspace where Nicole could continue to grow her artisan chocolate business. On the day she was reduced to tears, she had just discovered that her chosen contractor had falsified bids and contracts and done careless, shoddy work where he did any work at all. The man and his tools had now disappeared. The project was behind schedule and over-budget. Patel had to start all over.

Once she had faced the unpleasant facts and had a good cry, the former Motorola and Freescale engineer realized that if she wanted the contracting job done to her specifications, she might as well do it herself. So with some input from her father, retired civil engineer and Air Force Colonel Joseph Rippole, and the generous guidance of some folks at the city of Cedar Park's Planning and Development Department, Patel forged on. She took the design she'd created with the help of her brother, New York designer and branding expert Joey Rippole, and saw the chocolate factory project through to completion.

Nicole Patel celebrated the opening of the Delysia Chocolate Culinary Center on Oct. 19, 2014. She welcomed family, friends, customers, and members of the media to tour the new home of her 6-year-old company, Delysia Chocolatier. The new factory includes a lobby for product sales and customer pickup, a conference room complete with audio-visual equipment for client meetings and consultations, and a sleek and efficient kitchen where all the chocolate magic happens. There are portable tempering

machines and warmers, plenty of refrigerated and dry storage space, plus a staging area for packing and shipping with a convenient loading dock. She now employs two regular part-time staff people, interns from area cooking schools, and some freelance food bloggers who are helping to create a social media presence for the Delysia brand.

Now that the new facility is in operation, Patel says the business "has really taken on a life of its own. So much has happened so fast – we really needed to re-group and make sure we were all on the same page."

**"In the beginning I didn't even realize how much I didn't know."
– Nicole Patel**

She readily admits that taking Delysia from a home hobby to a full-fledged brand with its own custom production facility involved a very steep learning curve, especially without any previous food-service or retail experience. "There were so many things," she recalls. "In the beginning I didn't even realize how much I didn't know, and I'm not just talking about the contracting," she says with a rueful laugh. "Things like figuring out whether to sell retail or online, how to develop a web presence, and learning how to interact with customers. But the

biggest thing I hadn't anticipated was how to keep everything in balance, like spending time with my family, managing employees, developing products, promoting the business, making sales. It's been quite an adjustment."

Patel seems to have managed the learning curve pretty well. Delysia is flourishing as the holiday season approaches. The truffles, barks, molded chocolates, and drink mixes in the Delysia line are all products of Patel's imagination. The exquisite truffles come in various assortments, and each flavor is decorated with its own distinctive edible chocolate transfer. Actually making the chocolates is exacting work that requires concentration and attention to detail. Because so much of the business takes place online, Patel values any opportunity for personal interaction with consumers. She finds participating in community culinary events is not only good for product promotion, but for staff validation, as well. "I make it a point to take staff members and interns along when we do promotional events so they get to experience the 'wow' when customers enjoy something we've worked so hard to create," she explains.

That "wow" factor this season comes in the form of a milk chocolate salted caramel truffle (the company's bestseller) and the Holiday Truffle Collection (\$25) – nine pieces in three different flavors; gingerbread, mint, and eggnog. Patel says the eggnog truffles and bags of eggnog bark (\$5) have something of an annual cult following among certain clients. When queried about how they are made, all she will divulge is that the proprietary formula includes white chocolate, eggnog ingredients, and nutmeg. She says the best introduction to her product line is probably the Signature Truffle Collection (\$25), a nine-piece selection with milk chocolate, dark chocolate, caramel, honey, raspberry, coffee, peanut butter, hazelnut, and cinnamon flavors. The company's first breakout assortment was her Wine Truffle Collection (\$27) with fillings based on Texas Cabernet, Merlot, and Port inspired by a Valentine's Day event at Becker Vineyards several years ago. In a salute to ancient Aztec tradition, Patel does pair chocolate with chili peppers – habanero, cayenne, and jalapeño – although it's doubtful that Montezuma ever consumed anything quite like the Delysia ghost pepper bark. In addition to working with native peppers and the products of area vintners and distillers, Patel is always looking for ways to engage with

other food artisans. For example, she's created a salted caramel truffle with 64% dark chocolate and salt smoked by Franklin Barbecue, and an award-winning Salt Lick BBQ Dry Rub Chocolate Bark.

On Dec. 1, Patel will roll out the official Delysia Chocolatier newsletter with the opportunity for Delysia for Life membership, "sort of our version of a chocolate-of-the-month club," she explains. Folks who join will be the first to learn of new product launches and get advance notice about upcoming events at the chocolate culinary center and community events where Delysia chocolates will be featured. She's counting on the new promotion as a way to build brand loyalty and help take the company to the next anticipated milestone, a retail store in a more central location. "I have a couple ideas about ways I want to go with the storefront. I figure we're about two years out from that, but it's always on my mind," says the busy entrepreneur. After sampling her

excellent products and touring the factory she created doing her own contracting, planning to shop in a Delysia retail store in the future feels like a pretty safe bet. ■

