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## Chocolate covered fun, artisan style

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The crew from the Food Network's "Unwrapped" show spent nine hours in Irvine taping at Xan Confections the day before my chocolate lesson-interview. But Tracey Downey, Xan's chocolatier and Director of Research and Development, was brimming with enthusiasm when I arrived the next morning. She looked like she had spent the previous day lounging at a spa.

Downey has endless energy when it comes to the subject of chocolate. Putting on our hairnet caps before entering the kitchen, she explained that she is fulfilling her dreams by creating chocolate confections day in and day out.

Her confections are trend-setting. They are designed to be delicious and beautiful, but also to meet consumers' wide-ranging dietary needs. Her Saintry Sins line showcases chocolates that are low glycemic, diabetic friendly, gluten free and vegan.

Yes, they are delicious – without even a hint of the funky aftertaste once associated with such sweets. They are 29-calorie treats such as "Manna from Heaven," rich dark chocolate wrapped around a filling of raspberry sweetened with organic blue agave nectar (agave nectar has a relatively low glycemic index due to its proportion of fructose to glucose).

The Jewel Collection features gluten-free, vegan confections; buttery-tasting caramels without one itty-bitty drop of dairy products. It is one of these that will be featured on that upcoming hot-and-spicy themed Unwrapped TV show, the Ancho Chili Caramels. They are oh-so-rich tasting caramels spiked with alderwood smoked salt and a just-right smidgen of ancho chili.

"The vegan caramel is patent-pending," Downey said. "With Xan's Ancho Chili Caramel, you get the pure essence of the chili. Well, at first it tastes like a regular caramel, but then it (the spiciness) hits you a minute later.

"When dairy is present, you can't get the pure essence of the chili; you lose a layer of flavor. Milk kills chili. With dairy-free caramels nothing is taking away from that flavor. Some (candy-makers) use soymilk, but that creates a bitter aftertaste."

Xan's traditional chocolates are glorious, too, and include truffles, toffees and chocolate-coated layered squares of sheer bliss called "BigMouths" (crispy brown rice-marshmallow layer, topped with signature caramel, topped with homemade peanut butter).

Traditional chocolates with a Valentine theme were what Downey had in mind for my lesson, which she gleefully dubbed a "chance to play with chocolate."

Susan Johnson joined us for the fun. Johnson is the founder and CEO of Susan's Healthy Gourmet, an Orange County-based company that prepares and delivers fresh healthful meals to homes throughout Southern California. Downey and Johnson joined forces after Downey closed Downey's Chocolates in Laguna Niguel in 2008 and Xan Confections was born.

In the kitchen, two candy makers to our left were placing mounds of caramel on big chocolate turtles. They stood next to a chocolate machine that spewed melted dark chocolate from three rows of spigots into a rotating tub below.

"We'll make a basic ganache, shell some heart molds, pipe in the ganache, cap off with chocolate ... oh and we'll hand spray the molds and paint them with cocoa butter," she said in a song-like tone.

To make the ganache, she warmed (but not melted) 8 ounces of couverture dark chocolate chips and 8 ounces of couverture milk chocolate chips, suggesting that home candy makers could use chopped Scharffenberger chocolate or Green & Black organic chocolate. After placing the chocolate in a bowl, she put the bowl on a towel, advising that the granite countertop would cool the mixture too quickly. She added 6 ounces of boiling heavy whipping cream, then using a wire whisk, made small circles in the middle of the mixture.

"It will look grainy at first, but it should have an elastic look at the finish," she said, starting to make bigger and bigger circles with the whisk.

Indeed, after a few minutes, it looked elastic as she held up the whisk and a thick dark ribbon hung steady from the twisted wire, glistening under the overhead lights. After stirring in a little Grand Marnier (orange liqueur), she covered the surface with plastic wrap and chilled the mixture.

Next, we finger-painted with cocoa butter. After almost melting the pink-hued cocoa butter on 50 percent power in the microwave, Downey rigorously shook the squeeze-bottle container for about 20 seconds to temper it. We dabbed it helter-skelter into heart-shaped molds with gloved pointer fingers. Downey said that colorful cocoa butters are available for purchase online at [chefrubber.com](http://chefrubber.com).

Then, to create more color contrast, we used an air gun filled with white cocoa butter to spray the remaining surface of the molds. Once the cocoa set up, it was time to "shell" the molds – in other words, coat the entire

surface of the mold with a layer of chocolate.

After a quick demonstration of how to use that chocolate machine with the 24 nozzles (that chocolate contraption that had earlier caught my eye), I stepped into position.

Using the foot pedal, I stopped the flow of dark chocolate and held my 24-heart mold in position. After releasing the pedal, the hearts quickly filled with chocolate. Pedal back down, the chocolate stopped and I held the mold against a vibrating device for a count of three, to get rid of any air pockets or bubbles. Then I turned it over to dump the excess chocolate into the tub, and using a palette knife, scraped off excess chocolate from the top and sides.

After a brief chilling to harden the chocolate shells, we piped in the ganache leaving enough room at the top of each candy to cap each heart with a layer of chocolate.

That capping would require another trip to the chocolate-spewing machine, and I looked forward to another chance to operate the stop-start foot pedal and feel the weight of the chocolate flowing into my mold.

Talk about power. If you can command 24 rivers of chocolate to bend to your will, it makes you feel like the king of the world. No wonder Downey thinks this is fun.

Once chilled and unmolded, our chocolates looked gorgeous.

Mine were noticeably white with splashes of pink (I liked using the spray gun). Johnson's had a spattering of white; they were mostly pink and dark chocolate. And Downey's had a more subtle look, with very little pink and white; she brushed her hearts with a glittery powder to give them luster.

When asked about her earliest chocolate memories, Downey said that childhood time spent visiting her grandmother Rita Herbin in Chicago first fueled her chocolate love.

"We'd visit for four or five days and spend most of the time in the kitchen," she said, her eyes tearing at the thought of her grandmother's warmth. "We'd make the Hershey's chocolate cake in a 9-by-13-inch pan, using the recipe on the side of the cocoa can. And for holidays, my grandmother would make every single person's favorite dessert. If there were 20 guests, she would make 20 desserts, so that everyone could have their favorite."

Sounds like Downey might be following in Grandma's footsteps. She might come up with a favorite chocolate confection to please every taste bud on the planet before she's done.

Xan Confections are sold at Whole Foods, Bristol Farms and Rogers Gardens, or online at [xanconfections.com](http://xanconfections.com).

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