

Bountiful Cupboard



Maurie's Fine Chocolates and Candy



Chocolate Caper



Candinas Chocolates

Taste of Wisconsin

CHOCOLATE

By Henry Verden

Artist/cartoonist John Q. Tullius said nine out of ten people like chocolate. The tenth person always lies. Long ago, chocolate became the go-to indulgence for a large portion of humanity. We eat it when we're happy, when we're sad, when we're celebrating, and for no good reason at all. Americans consume 11.7 pounds per person annually. Most chocolate is consumed as candy bars and similar mass-produced treats, but for a growing number, the hunt for high-quality confections made in small quantities by hand using the best ingredients has become a mission.

Even though chocolate has evolved into a year-round treat, holidays continue to be hot spots for sales. So, as Mother's Day, Easter, and other occasions approach, chocolates with a special something are even more in demand.

Maurie's Fine Chocolates and Candy

For some of the best in classic handmade chocolates, you can't do better than Maurie's Fine Chocolates and Candy in Madison, Wisconsin. Owner Cherie Diamond opened her shop in 1991, taking over the business after her father Maurie died. He had been making chocolates since 1941 in his shop in Illinois. Closely guarded family recipes are the secret to some of the best things you will ever put in your mouth.

While Maurie's hand-dipped chocolates and elegantly shaped truffles are sinfully good, Maurie's is unique in that they offer an impressive selection of gift boxes and a mind-boggling selection of molded chocolates. Every season includes holiday-

specific boxes and containers as well as a standard selection.

A quick scan of www.mauriesfinechocolates.com shows molds of dark chocolate sailboats, milk chocolate alligators, white and milk chocolate Guernsey cows, computers, swans, and a chess-board with all the pieces. That barely scratches the surface. Each holiday brings its own unique shapes. If you're looking for a special present for the chocolate lover in your life, Maurie's is your one-stop shop.

Ambrosius—Chocolatier

For those who want something a little (or a lot) out of the ordinary, you won't find any place better than Gail Ambrosius—Chocolatier, also in Madison. Gail Ambrosius thinks that bittersweet chocolate is the best chocolate, so that's all she uses. What she wraps that chocolate around is what has made her famous. If anyone can be said to have taken chocolate making out of the ordinary and into the realm of fine art, it's Gail.

Gail studied with the renowned French Chocolatiers, Valrhona and the Cluizel family. Returning to the USA, she opened her shop on Madison's east side, applying what she had learned with a vengeance.

Gail recommends eating her chocolates within two weeks since they are made with only the highest-quality ingredients and include no waxes or preservatives. They look like other upscale treats but that's where any similarity ends. These chocolates are an educational experience for your



No detail is taken for granted at Gail Ambrosius.

Someone once said
that the best chocolate
is the one you haven't
tasted yet.

—HENRY VERDEN



The hand-crafted commitment shows in the finished product.



Melted chocolate waiting to become outrageously good treats at Gail Ambrosius

Gift boxes of Swiss Pralines and Truffles for any occasion are assembled to your order by Chocolate Caper.

CHOCOLATE TREND

It's not just the small chocolatiers that are making headway in the realm of gourmet confections. Major manufacturers are realizing that there's money to be made from folks who are willing to pay a little (or in some cases a lot) more to get something a cut above.

Hershey's has entered the upscale market with a new line of products they call Cocoa Reserve. The concept is a winner. A full range of milk, dark, and bittersweet chocolates promise an indulgent treat with broad availability. Part of the line is "single origin" chocolates made with beans from all over the world.

The four currently offered are from Java (37%), Arriba (50%), Santa Domingo (67%), and São Tomé (67%). They also take these chocolates and use them to produce truffles and drinks. A visit to the Hershey's website will even tell you how to host your own chocolate-tasting party.

While Nestlé has a number of upscale brands overseas, they were one of the first to jump on the American fine chocolates bandwagon with the introduction of Nestlé Treasures.

They offer three truffles: dark chocolate, Cappuccino, and Caramel. The rest of the selections are dark Chocolate Caramel, Strawberries and Crème, Creamy Caramel, Peanut Butter, and Chocolate Crème.

Nestlé has dominated chocolate chips for many years. Their milk chocolate, semisweet chocolate, and butterscotch have long been the chip standards.

Nestlé is going upscale in this area too, with Swirled. Swirled chips feature flavor combinations like dark chocolate and raspberry, sweet chocolate and mint, milk chocolate and caramel, and milk chocolate and peanut butter. They are sure to keep Nestlé on top of the chip market for a long time to come.

Mars didn't develop an upscale line, they bought one. Dove chocolates started in Chicago and were made famous by the decadently tasty Dove Bar. Since Mars took over, they have expanded the line to include candies, cookies, and ice cream.

There is an ever-expanding market in chocolate, making choices tougher all the time. Aside from Hershey's, Nestlé, and Mars, you can choose from an overwhelming variety including classic standbys like Lindt, Ghiradelli, Cadbury, and Godiva or choose new arrivals in the U.S. market like Hachez, Scharffen Berger, Vosges, and New Tree.

Some of these are more reasonably priced than others, but all are worth trying.

If you want a quick fix or need to pick up an emergency present, good chocolate is no farther away than Walgreens or your local grocery or favorite specialty food store.

palate. Unexpected and unlikely flavor combinations dance to an extraordinary finish in your mouth, creating the most interesting, unusual, and delicious morsels I've tasted in a long time. My favorite was Cinnamon/Cayenne dusted with cocoa powder. I expected a good deal of dissonance but the Cinnamon and Cayenne proved a mellow and satisfying combination. The distinctive finish from the cocoa powder provided an extra bonus.

Her offerings include Maharajah Curry with Saffron and White Chocolate shavings, Om (a fruit from Madagascar) with green tea and jasmine blossoms, Cognac topped with baby Candied Ginger, and Rose Garden tea topped with fresh petals.

Gail is always looking for new flavor ideas and encourages the submission of suggestions. Gail Ambrosius stands firmly on the cutting edge of chocolate creations. Her candies are the kind that make life complete.

Candinas Chocolates

Two chocolatiers we visited prove that fine chocolates don't just come from large cities. Candinas Chocolates hails from Verona, Wisconsin. Markus Candinas apprenticed with Swiss chocolate makers for six years, learned his craft well, returned to Wisconsin, and opened his factory in 1994. Candinas Chocolates are made without preservatives, using only the finest ingredients. This means they have a fairly short shelf life. In fact, the only place they are sold is at the retail boutique at their factory, a new location on Madison's Capitol Square, or online.

What they lack in durability, they more than make up for in taste. These chocolates can only be described as a sensual experience. The exquisite chocolate flavors are rich, complex, and make your tongue want to jump for joy. *Consumer Reports* agrees. They rated Candinas Chocolates as the best traditional chocolates in the country. To paraphrase Benjamin Franklin, Candinas Chocolates are proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy.

The Chocolate Caper

Oregon, Wisconsin is the home of The Chocolate Caper. Their game is Swiss pralines. Many confectioners claim to make pralines but those made by The Chocolate Caper are a whole different animal. Owners Ellen and Claude Marendaz make their pralines in small daily batches, cutting them by hand. Only the best goes into Chocolate Caper's goodies, including chocolate from California, almond butter from Missouri, and hazelnut butter from Oregon. What they do with those ingredients is a thing of beauty.

Claude came from Switzerland with his recipes and a passion for his craft. His pralines come with two distinct layers, a top layer of pure chocolate and, on the bottom, chocolate mixed with almond butter, hazelnut butter, or toffee. The combination creates a flavor as unique as it is delicious. I was

surprised by the snap when I first bit into one of Claude’s pralines and delighted by a flood of flavor that embraced my taste buds in a warm chocolate hug. The almond and hazelnut pralines are infused with a subtle nut flavor that is by no means intrusive and will please even those who are not nut fans.

You don’t have to buy a pig in a poke at The Chocolate Caper. If you stop by the store, you can sample before you buy. For something totally different, but no less decadent, don’t forget to get some glacéed Australian Apricots dipped in bittersweet chocolate, peanut butter cups made with natural peanut butter, chocolate-dipped raspberry or Marian blackberry gels, turtles, or beautiful, imported swiss truffles.

Baraboo Candy Company

For pure fun and silliness, you can’t beat the offerings from the Baraboo Candy Company. Since 1981, they have produced award-winning, high-quality chocolates daily in small batches with the best ingredients. Whether you stop at their factory, buy online, or get a treat at a store, you’ll have no trouble recognizing their specialties.

Cow Pies are their flagship treat. Imagine a turtle on a grand scale. Caramel is loaded with pecans and the whole thing is covered in chocolate. Moo Chews are fresh caramel dipped in chocolate, and Udder Fingers (my favorite name) are toffee covered in chocolate and liberally sprinkled with chopped nuts. It doesn’t end there. Baraboo Candy Company also makes a Cow Lick sucker, a walleye made out of solid chocolate named Wally Walleye, Chewy-Gooey Pretzel Sticks, Green Bay Puddles, and an excellent selection of traditional chocolates. There’s nothing fancy here, just good traditional chocolates; kind of the chocolate equivalent of comfort food and, best of all, they’re available almost everywhere.

Other local Wisconsin chocolate sources

A quick run down of some other local Wisconsin chocolate sources include:

Troll Truffles, Stoughton, www.trolltruffles.com. Rich individual chocolates in fun designer shapes including eight different breeds of horse heads, espresso and coffee cups, Swedish bears, gift boxes, ducks, hearts, and trolls.

Amy’s Candy Kitchen, Cederburg, www.amyscandykitchen.com. Confections made with the best Belgian chocolates. Caramel and award-winning caramel apples are their specialty.

End of the Trail Candy Shop, Waupun, www.EndoftheTrail.com. One of the best traditional chocolate shops run by the third generation of chocolate makers. Stop by their place, have a gourmet coffee, some ice cream, and watch them turn out chocolate masterpieces.

All these chocolate makers barely scratch the surface of what’s available out there. New chocolate makers are springing up all the time in towns both big and small. Someone once said that the best chocolate is the one you haven’t tasted yet. Fortunately, chocolatiers make sure the best is always lurking just down the road.



(Top) Candinas Chocolates are readied for packing. (Bottom left) Marcus Candinas is in his kitchen every day to insure the quality that has made his chocolates the best in the country according to Consumer Reports. (Bottom right) That devotion results in edible masterpieces.

• IF YOU GO • CHOCOLATIERS

Candinas Chocolates, 2435 Old PB, Verona, WI 53593,
(800) 845-1554, www.candinas.com

The Chocolate Caper, 105 S. Main St., Oregon, WI 53575,
(608) 835-9294, www.chocolatecaper.com

Maurie’s Fine Chocolates and Candy, 1637 Monroe St., Madison, WI 53711,
(608) 255-9092, www.mauriesfinechocolates.com

Gail Ambrosius — Chocolatier, 2086 Atwood Avenue, Madison, WI 53704,
(608) 249-3500, www.gailambrosius.com

Baraboo Candy Company, 10891 Co-op Lane, Baraboo, WI 53913,
(800) 967-1690, www.baraboocandy.com