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## Her business is your pleasure

By Justine Kessler

It seems natural that a woman with the last name “Ambrosius” would become an award-winning artisan chocolatier. But like so many women do, Gail Ambrosius took a circuitous route from a Seymour, Wisconsin farm to the Atwood Avenue chocolate boutique that bears her name.

Creating sweet and delectable treats for the pleasure of others has always been one of Gail’s passions. Growing up on a dairy farm as one of nine children, Gail often found herself assisting her mother in the kitchen.

“I remember making homemade chocolate pudding, standing over a huge pot, stirring cream ...” she recalls. “Making pudding for 12 people took a long time, but when it was done, it was just about the best thing you could put in your mouth!”

### Epiphany in Paris

During a high school trip, 17-year-old Gail had an epiphany that stuck with her for the next 30 years. When she disembarked to exchange her dollars for francs at a local bank, the tour bus accidentally left without her. Upon finding herself alone in Paris, she experienced a moment of panic — followed by sheer delight.

“We had been in Paris for several days at that point, so I knew the subway system enough to get around, and I had been studying French for four years so I was comfortable speaking the language,” she says. “I had a fabulous time — went shopping, got my hair cut ...”

She also visited the wonderful French patisseries. The shops were packed with mountains of sweet, delicious morsels, including arrays of decadent dark chocolates.

“The patisseries draw you in,” she says. “Everything is so beautiful, and you just want to eat it all!”

What struck her the most was watching Parisians enjoy their chocolates.

“I stood and watched these people eat

these chocolates, and they were in ecstasy — it was like they were on another planet!” she says. “So I bought myself a chocolate and when I ate it I immediately thought ‘Yes! I get it now! Eating this is the best thing you can do!’”

At the time she reflected on how great it would be to bring a bit of that Parisian delight to people back home, to encourage them to slow down and enjoy something delicious. It would be years, however, before she dusted off this dream and put it into action.

At age 18 Gail left the family farm and moved to Madison, where she worked as a travel agent, a hostess, a waitress and a bartender. She attended college, dropped out, got married, had a son, got divorced and returned to school again, earning a degree in cartography from UW-Madison.

She spent the next 10 years as a cartographer for the Department of Natural Resources. But in 2003, rumblings of layoffs started rippling through the state agencies. That fall, Gail lost her job.

### Plan B

“I had been thinking for a long time about the possibility of a layoff and about what my ‘Plan B’ would be,” she says. “I decided it was now or never to pursue the dream of having my own chocolate shop, so I decided to go for it.”

Gail began her endeavor by reading books, talking to other entrepreneurs, hooking up with a mentor through the UW Small Business Development Center, taking classes and working on a business plan. The chocolate, she soon came to realize, was the easy part.

“This process really challenged me to examine whether or not I was cut out to be a business owner,” she says. “I knew I had a good idea, but my mentor forced me to answer some really tough questions about the business side of things.”

Next, Gail had to perfect the fine art of making chocolate. She did so via an online program through Ecole Chocolat, which involved three months of intensive, hands-on work. After completing this program she enrolled in the Master Chocolatier course, which took her back to Paris for additional training with some of the world’s best chocolatiers.

“The Master Chocolatier program in Paris was extremely valuable,” she says. “Not only did I learn about the chocolate and experiment with lots of different flavors and recipes, but I was able to visit a number of chocolateries to look at different packaging styles, set-ups in the retail stores and in the kitchens too.”

Just before Thanksgiving 2004, Gail opened her doors in a small retail space at the corner of First and Main in downtown Madison. She made it through her first Christmas and Valentine’s Day with the help of family and friends who were willing to lend a hand, and within six months Gail hired her first employee.

Today, she employs 10 people, has moved to a larger space on Atwood Avenue, and boasts production of several thousand pieces per day during the peak holiday season — all by hand.

“Machines could probably do it more efficiently in the long run, but they’re not as interesting to talk to!” she says.

Gail’s chocolates have gained a devoted following in the community, but it’s not just her tasty treats that are garnering attention. In early 2008 she was one of 10 recipients of the Dane County Small Business Award, which celebrates small businesses and the contributions they make to their communities and the local economy.

In the spring of 2007, Gail was honored by Count Me In for Women’s Economic

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Independence, an organization started by Nell Merlino (the woman behind Take Your Daughter to Work Day). The group's Make Mine a Million initiative aims to have one million women business owners with \$1 million in gross revenues by the year 2010.

"The Make Mine a Million initiative has been a great way to connect with other women business owners, to network and to get support," she says.

#### Back to her roots

As far as what the future holds, Gail has a growing interest in returning to her roots, so to speak.

"Growing up on a farm, I felt very connected to the land and the cycle of producing food," she says. "Now, I'm very interested in the social and environmental aspects of cacao production and learning more about the farms and the farmers who grow it."

Gail has traveled to a number of the countries where her chocolate is grown, including Costa Rica, Colombia and Ecuador. During her visits to the cacao farms, she is able to live and work with the farmers and to see agroforestry and biodiversity in action.

"I'm familiar with the farming life. I know what they're going through, but I also see the other end of it. Here I am taking this very modest product that they're growing, and I'm selling it as a luxury product," she says. "I feel passionate about working to ensure that these farmers and their families receive a fair wage so they're able to educate their children."



*Justine Kessler is a Madison-area writer.*



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