



PLAYFUL: Madame Chocolat's Hasty Khoei.

He says, she says: Fabulous chocolates

Xuan Ngo and Hasty Khoei take artisanal sweets in deliciously different directions.

By Betty Hallock, *Times Staff Writer*
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IN the deep of night when most of Los Angeles sleeps, Xuan Ngo -- his hands working with all the speed and precision of a veteran pastry chef -- intently cuts small squares of ganache, scrapes the seeds from Madagascar vanilla beans and candies tiny bits of freshly ground coffee for his Xuan Chocolates.



Photos by SPENCER WEINER
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REFINED: Xuan Ngo
crafts a confection.

Cut to a crisp, sunny afternoon at Madame Chocolat, a recently opened store in Beverly Hills: Owner Hasty Khoei stands behind the counter in stylish fitted whites, a telltale smudge of chocolate on one cuff, cheerily placing samples of her peanut butter ladybugs or rum-caramel hearts on tiny silver trays for customers.

In the last few weeks, two new chocolatiers have stepped up to help fill L.A.'s growing demand for artisan chocolates -- one a single-minded Vietnamese French pastry cook adopted as a boy by a prominent chef in Provence, the other a spirited Persian American entrepreneur raised in Woodland Hills whom master chocolatier Jacques Torres took under his professional wing.

The two couldn't be more different -- nor could their chocolates.

Ngo's are refined, delicate squares of ganache enrobed in thin shells of chocolate, each piece painstakingly decorated. Khoei's are molded chocolates in the fun shapes of big raspberries, coffee cups or faceted jewels; in her shop are two near-life-size chocolate busts that she created for Valentine's Day. Ngo, serious and meticulous, has worked his way through kitchens in Provence, Paris, New York and L.A., mostly satisfied to man his station in big bakeries or bustling kitchens, such as Lenotre, Daniel and Spago. Khoei, outgoing and charming, worked in finance before deciding to pursue a career as a chocolatier.



SUPERB: Xuan Ngo's chocolates with green tea, top, and ginger.

Ngo drops a pristine square of Earl Grey-infused ganache into a half-hot pan filled with tempered chocolate (a mixture of French Valrhona and Swiss Des Alpes). He carefully fishes it out with a three-tined dipping fork, gently banging the fork against the side of the pan to get a perfectly even, thin couverture. "You don't want any bubbles," he says. His ganache is special - creamy, smooth, melt-in-your-mouth; to infuse it, he uses milk instead of cream because he says the milk better takes on the flavors of the tea. The result is delicate but dark, not-too-sweet chocolate with the tea's bright flavor of citrus and heady notes of bergamot.

Once the chocolate has been coated, he takes his dipping fork and drags and lifts it in one motion across the top to make three distinct lines, then sprinkles on a few tea leaves and says, "Voila!" with a big smile. "The more you work with chocolate, the more you understand, get the feel for it," he says.

Ngo seems happiest leaning over a slab of marble, concentrating on every detail of the confection-making process. Khoei is at the top of her game when she's interacting with customers, holding court in her shop and playing the role of Madame Chocolat.

Born in Danang, Vietnam, Ngo grew up mostly in Les Baux de Provence, where his adopted father, chef Jean-Andre Charial, owns a hotel and Michelin two-star restaurant, Oustau de Baumaniere. Ngo, 37, says he spent summers in the kitchen and was immediately drawn to pastry. "I liked the accuracy and the organization, and the consistency," he says.

After high school, his father's connections helped him land a job at Patisserie Lenotre, the Paris bakery renowned for its sweets and chocolate confections, where he worked for four years, mostly baking cakes. Next was New York, where he worked at Daniel Boulud's restaurant Daniel, when Francois Payard was pastry chef there. That's when he first started making chocolates, served only to the restaurant's VIPs. "I learned a lot from him, about how to work and how to work clean," says Ngo of Payard.

In 2000, Ngo moved to Los Angeles to work at Spago (Wolfgang Puck had once worked at Baumaniere and helped Ngo get his green card) and has since worked at Sona and Boule and now as a pastry cook at the Peninsula Beverly Hills. It's only after he finishes his shift at the Peninsula that he begins to make chocolates, working through the night to fill orders sold through Los Angeles-based coffee roaster LA Mill's website.

Flavors include chocolate onyx, for which Ngo uses the roaster's Black Onyx coffee, and Earl Grey-infused chocolate. He also makes fleur de sel caramel and ginger and passion fruit chocolates. "I taste, and I play," he says matter-of-factly. Other flavors he is playing with include Sicilian pistachio, ginger caramel and calamansi (a citrus).

Lady breaks the mold



AFTER five years of planning, including more than a year at the California School of Culinary Arts in Pasadena, a year and a half working for Torres in New York and four trips to Brussels to source chocolate, Khoei opened Madame Chocolat, a chocolate boutique and "factory," in December.

Rows of chocolates line the marble counter in Khoei's shop, all green and gold and decked out in the style of Louis XVI. But most of the 1,800-square-foot space is devoted to the open chocolate kitchen, in which Khoei's staff fills trays of chocolate-lined molds as tempering machines whirl in the background, their wheels spinning melted dark and milk chocolate.

The molded chocolates are made with custom chocolate that Khoei buys from the Belgian company Belcolade. They have names such as Ooh- la-la! or C'est la vie! The Monsieur is filled with a Johnny Walker Blue Label ganache.

"I always knew I wanted my own business," says Khoei, 31. After culinary school, she had been hired by the Ritz Hotel Paris, but the French government wouldn't grant her a work permit, so she turned to Torres. Khoei says she persistently called, e-mailed and faxed Torres to gain entry. Ultimately, she became opening chef of Jacques Torres Chocolate in west SoHo.

"She has what it takes to be one of the premier chocolatiers in this country," Torres says. "She told me, 'I'm going to create my own company.' You have no idea how many employees tell me that. A couple of years later, she's there.... A lot of chefs can cook very well, but they can't talk to the customer. She has the whole thing. She's charming, she's beautiful, she can sell, she can make."

Khoei's shop is strewn with metal statuettes of Madame Chocolat, a svelte woman in a formal dress, rising up from a pool of chocolate. Four plasma screens display pictures of Khoei making chocolate with Torres and his business partner Ken Goto, who assisted Torres at Le Cirque for many years.

At a private tasting in December, Torres and Goto turned up to help celebrate the opening of Khoei's store, along with top pastry chefs such as Jean-Philippe Maury and Jean-Claude Canestrier of the Bellagio and Paris hotels in Las Vegas respectively, and other chefs who have received the honor of meilleur ouvrier de France.

Quite a showing for an L.A. chocolate shop.

For his part, Ngo plans to launch his own website this summer, from which he'll sell his chocolates; he's looking for a small space for a store too. "It's time," he says, "for me to do something on my own."

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Xuan Chocolates, available at www.lamillcoffee.com. Madame Chocolat, 212 N. Canon Drive, Beverly Hills, (310) 247-9990.