Architect embraces â??the magicâ?? of chocolate in a second career where he blends creativity with science of the craft

Description

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That year in Paris. It was everything 32-year-old David Upchurch had dreamed of. The streets, the galleries, the shows, the people. A charming apartment not far from the Moulin Rouge. A chocolate shop at one end of the block, a patisserie at the other.

â??That first truffle was magical. I spent all my money on chocolate. European chocolate, what we call craft chocolate, tastes so different from our own.â?•

Upchurch rents kitchen space in Jack London Square with two other candy makers. Photo by Chef Evan Brittell.

Upchurch is older now. Heâ??s 56, but the memory of that year has only grown stronger.

While Upchurch always loved chocolate, it was many years before he gave himself permission to turn his passion into his vocation. Initially, he worked as an architect designing custom homes and commercial properties. When the market for his skills collapsed with the recession of 2008, Upchurch found himself scrambling for jobs to make ends meet.

Today, he shares commercial kitchen space, where he makes bonbons and truffles and a â??surprisingly popularâ?• pate de fruit, made with California fruits and wine.

For now, Upchurch is relying on sales via email and social media to keep his new business going. Photo by Chef Evan Brittell.

Itâ??s a passion project for sure; he admits being blessed, with low living expenses and a spouse with a job. He is selling, somewhat slowly â?? online, at house parties, pop-ups and more recently at the San Rafael and Noe Valley Farmersâ?? Markets. He was hoping to start selling this summer at the Stonestown Farmersâ?? Market.

But the pandemic, which has closed farmerâ??s markets, exhibitions and popup festivals, has him back to relying on sales through email and social media, which the craft chocolate culture is embracing, he said. â??Check out this hashtag, #stayhomewithchocolate,â?• he said. â??It is impressive how creative

and energetic small business owners are, especially in food. The craft chocolate culture is expressing great creativity.

Upchurchâ??s shift from office to kitchen work began with an impulse. Up until then, chocolates had been a hobby and heâ??d only made them for friends. Now that he had time, he wanted a better foundation. He signed up for the one-year pastry major in the Culinary and Hospitality program at City College of San Francisco.

The physicality of chocolate-making

The class was very diverse; some were even older than David. And it was hard work. Classes started at 6 a.m. â??I would run for the J Church to arrive on time (he lives in Noe Valley). Weâ??d be on our feet for six hours a day.â?• Although he had studied yoga and was in good shape, he noted that architects sit for much of the day. â??I wasnâ??t prepared. I still wear custom orthotics.â?•

â??Baking, like architecture, has science behind it,â?• he said. â??You need science to build a neo-classical palace in France and you need science to build a wedding cake so it doesnâ??t topple.â?•

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Coursework gave him the foundation he wanted; the internship opened doors. He first worked at Saratoga Chocolate, which replaced Joseph Schmidt Confections when the owner retired in 2009.â?• That was followed by an internship with the San Francisco Baking Institute. â??One of the most intense and difficult experiences of my life, but also my first glimpse at what a Michelin Star restaurant looks like,â?• he said.

After five years with Recchiuti, the first confectioner in the U.S. making continental European chocolate, Upchurch was ready to go out on his own.

Upchurch in his Oakland kitchen pulling out ingredients for his next creation. Photo by Chef Evan Brittell.

â??Fine Chocolate is a fresh food; itâ??s very perishable,â?• he said. â??You can keep it for maybe three-four days. Preservatives give it a different taste. Cold, heat, freezing temperatures all ruin chocolate.â?•

Upchurch is now an expert in making chocolates. The problem is selling it. Heâ??d like to rent a small store, but Bay Area storefronts are expensive. Thatâ??s where the Renaissance Center fit in; where he learned to make a business plan.

In the meantime, he got a chocolate supplier in Ecuador. Heâ??s visited and met the supplier and the farmers growing the cocoa beans, â??I buy direct trade from the people making chocolate,â?• he said, so itâ??s not diluted with cocoa powder and sugar, like so much of U.S.-made chocolate.

Next, he rented shared space with two other candy makers in a commercial kitchen in Jack London Square. He commutes there four days a week from his home in San Francisco.

Chosen for the Craft Chocolate Exhibition

The hard work paid big in one way: He was chosen as one of 12 candy maker to exhibit at the March Craft Chocolate Exhibition in San Francisco, which advertised lectures, classes and exhibits by â??the finest chocolate makers, chocolatiers and pastry chefs.â?•

â??It was a big deal. It was the first such exhibition to feature craft chocolatesâ?• along with raw chocolates and chocolate-making equipment.

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David Upchurch was one of 12 makers of chocolate candies at the Craft Chocolate Exhibition in San Francisco this year. Photo by Becky Shank

For two and a half days, Upchurch handed out chocolates and explained the science and magic of his candies. He also sold chocolate â?? a lot of chocolate. â??We made many new friends.â?•

Many new businesses fail â?? 20 percent during their first two years, 65 percent in the first 10, according the Bureau of Labor Statistics â?? and that concerns him.

But heâ??s holding steady. â??itâ??s not so unusual to try a new venture at a later age. My mother opened a bakery in our hometown, Covington, Ga., when she was older.â?•

Upchurch, like all chocolatiers, he said, expresses his personality through his chocolates. â??Having lived in France for a moment of my life, my appreciation for chocolate is from the European tradition.

â??Here in California, I see chocolate with different eyes. As an artist, I wish to share stories and connect dots between the rich cultural traditions of the Old World and New World. As a chocolatier, I wish to explore the complexities of flavor that fine chocolate offers us. There is some fun to be had as well.â?•

Eventually, Upchurch wants to open a small shop like Joseph Schmidt did in 1983 in San Francisco. A European-trained baker, Schmidt made colorful gourmet confections with imported Belgian chocolate. His holiday creations were eagerly anticipated.

â??Schmidt was about the magic of chocolate,â?• Upchurch said.

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Joseph Schmidtâ??s chocolate Valentine hearts

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