

How Sweet it is

Chocolatier takes risks joining unexpected flavors to create one-of-a-kind artisan treat

BY ADAM PARKER
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The Chef Master double-boiler is nudging the chocolate toward its optimum temperature. The 25-year-old, tattooed candyman is talking about couverture and ganache and tempering and nibs and solids and liquor and cocoa butter.

He stirs and stirs, ensuring the texture is smooth. He forms coffee-imbued "latte" balls in the chocolate palms of his hands, gently forming them and placing them evenly across the wax paper. He submerges these cores into a darker brew with a small-handled dipper, then drizzles melted white chocolate across the tops.

It's weird to think that John Eric Battles, chocolatier extraordinaire, has the imposing image of a Buddhist bodhisattva permanently etched into the skin of his right shoulder. Or that he once dyed his hair goth black. Or that the flesh tunnels in his ears sometimes



Chocolatemaking is hands-on work.

Inside

To see John Eric Battles make his chocolates, go to www.charleston.net/video



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accommodate gourmet earrings. Then again, it's weird to think he's been making gourmet chocolates only for a year.

Busy days off

Normally, Battles is the sous chef at EVO Pizzeria, a small corner restaurant on East Montague Avenue in North Charleston's old commercial center. Normally, Battles makes pizza, forming the dough, applying the fresh toppings, sliding the prepared pie to his kitchen mate who cooks it in the wood-burning oven.

Normally, Battles deals with the saltier side of the kitchen. But on his days off — Sunday and Monday, when the restaurant is closed — Battles sets up for making sweets. Out come the big metal bowls, the trays, the wire tools. Out come the cream and cocoa and butter and sugar. Out come all the ingredients he uses to concoct these savory delicacies.

Battles is a risk-taker, never content to mold chocolate alone. It must be combined with various flavors. Citrus, for example, or bacon, or star anise, or red peppers, or smoked sea salt, or basil, or olives, or fresh strawberry, or soft caramel.

He goes for bursts of contrast: He couples the sweet with the salty, the poignant with the mel-low, the edgy with the creamy. What appears to be a simple piece of homemade chocolate is in fact packed with the unexpected.

These recipe ideas are not new, of course, just hard to find. The



John Eric Battles

tailer, La Maison du Chocolat, has been making interesting (and expensive) morsels of flavorful goodness for years, mixing cocoa with herbs and fruits and liquors and oils. But Battles' artisan tidbits go a step further, often combining two or more added ingredients, setting the tongue abuzz with curious delight.

Diners will find Battles' experiments on EVO's dessert menu. If you ask him, he might prepare a special order for you — that is, when he's not forming pizzas or being a husband.

Family man

Battles tried to graduate from the University of Alabama. But the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, stirred up his hometown of Mentone. People went a little crazy, he says. Two Egyptian residents were shot. The racial epithets went flying. There was a backlash against the area's Middle Eastern population.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TYRONE WALKER/STAFF

Go ahead, take a bite. Battles beckons chocolate lovers with inventive candies such as coffee-imbued "latte" balls drizzled with white chocolate.

Battles got out of there, settling in the Netherlands. He liked the Dutch way of life, the "people-oriented" society. He stayed in a college dorm in Groningen up north, surviving with the money that was meant to pay for his education. He worked at the harbor doing odd jobs. He paid no rent, ate cheap food.

And then in March 2002, after nine months abroad, he returned home to his trucker dad and homemaker mom and regular siblings, to the town where Hank Williams got his last haircut before dying.

"I left because I felt like an inconvenience to the Dutch," he says. "I couldn't speak Dutch; they could speak English. That was embarrassing."

He went to work in one of Mentone's factories, a hostery mill, loading big spools of yarn onto the constantly spinning feeding

with his partner, Ricky Hacker, then open the restaurant on East Montague Avenue.

In 2003, Battles volunteered at a Food Not Bombs soup kitchen housed at a vacant Bojangles in North Charleston. There, he met Laren Bolchey. They would marry two years later.

From Normandy Farms, Battles went to Whole Foods. He began to expand his capabilities, making wedding cakes to order, learning from Bolchey's grandmother and cakemaker, Thelma Mitchum. He also made pizzas. When McIntosh and Hacker opened their restaurant in March 2007, they needed a sous chef. They went straight to pizzemaker Battles at Whole Foods, but the tattooed man with the giant wooden spatula couldn't get away until October.

By fall 2007, Battles was starting to get the hang of the chocolate thing. Untrained in such matters, chocolatiering was mastered through trial and error, he says. "I learned by total blunders."

Clumpy ganache. Chocolate blooms. Bad combos. Soon, though, he was getting compliments from important people at FIG and the Charleston Place restaurants who came to EVO and tried Battles' buttery baubles.

Today, some of EVO's customers frequent the restaurant as much for the chocolates as for the pizza.

"They're a huge part of our menu that we're stoked to have," Hacker says.

Building character

Battles got his first tattoo when

he was 15. His goal is a full body suit. He's about two-thirds of the way there.

His grandfather, Bill, had a tattoo on his arm: a pin-up girl. One day, the grandson asked about it. "That's your grandmother," Bill explained.

His father, Tommy, a former Marine, has a tiny cross tattoo on one shoulder.

Laren's tattoo goal is more modest than her husband's. Two or three small ones are enough. The first one, done by someone still learning the craft, didn't go too well. The small design is obscured by puffy scar tissue.

A graduate of Winthrop University and The Citadel, Laren is certified to teach history and social studies. She just finished her internship at Stratford High School in Goose Creek, her alma mater. She says she rarely eats more than two or three pieces of chocolate a day.

Laren was there when her husband was learning his craft, tasting the results, offering advice, tolerating the mess. When they met, Eric weighed 111 pounds, she says. Now he's reached 137 pounds.

At EVO one recent Monday afternoon, Battles was busy dipping and rolling and drizzling, preparing for the week's sales. He can barely make enough pieces to satisfy the demand. His fancy chocolates, a sensuous gift to the palate, are beginning to catch on. "It's happened kind of quickly," Battles says.

Reach **Adam Parker** at 937-594 or aparker@postandcourier.com