

## A Sweet Job

People don't always notice the quiet woman behind the counter, her cap pulled over her face, fingers busy over melting chocolate. When they walk inside Schokolad on Central Avenue, all they see are dazzling displays of specialty chocolates. Life-size chocolate chess sets compete for attention with rows of artisanal truffles. But the woman behind the counter is worth noticing.

Chelsey Cash, 30, is an ocean engineer turned chocolatier. At first glance, she doesn't seem the Willy Wonka type. She's tall and athletic, a lover of outdoor sports like kayaking and Rollerblading. Although she spends her days creating raspberry truffles and dipped apricots, she doesn't like cooking. For Cash, making chocolate is more like art. It's a chance to do what she loves after giving up on the corporate world.

She says her job is "pretty sweet."

Her day begins at 8 a.m., when she wraps a brown apron around her waist and starts melting chocolate. She breaks off a chunk of milk chocolate from a 5-pound block and melts it in a Hilliard's Chocolate System Machine, which looks like an oversized mixing bowl. What she makes depends on the day. Sometimes it's a pair of chocolate handcuffs. Sometimes it's a chocolate cat. Lately, pianos are all the rage. Cash sets a piano on the counter next to a pile of edible golf balls while she constructs a doctor's kit out of milk chocolate.

Although she works with chocolate eight hours a day, she never gets tired of eating it. Neither does her family. "I cannot go home for Christmas without bringing 20 pounds of chocolate with me," she says. Her boyfriend, Allen Hilts, has withdrawal symptoms if she doesn't bring home chocolate. They both like the peanut butter truffles best. (The only members of Cash's family who don't plead for sweets are her three cockatiels – Nugget, Noodle and Caesar – because they prefer cheddar biscuits.)

Cash is an artist at heart. When she was growing up in Minnesota, 13 miles from the nearest town, she converted her family's living room into a summer art studio. Today, she doesn't have time for drawing, but finds fulfillment in the artistry of chocolate.

Mark Lecato, the store owner, thinks Cash's artistic background makes her chocolates unique. "It's evident that she has a good eye," he says.

She never wants to go back to engineering, but sometimes she draws upon those skills when she designs a chocolate creation. Last June, she built an edible replica of the Pier. It took shape in the window of Schokolad, temptingly delicious and architecturally sound. She inherited her knack for engineering from her dad, an elementary school custodian who built things to stay strong.

“My dad always taught, use enough glue and nails so it will hold together,” Cash says. “Once I started taking engineering classes, he was asking me how to build stuff. I was like, ‘Dad, you know how.’”

But building with chocolate isn’t always sweet. When the shop’s air conditioning broke, the pier began to melt. Cash watched helplessly as her replica of the Cha Cha Coconuts restaurant fell through the chocolate roof. She managed to repair it. Twenty pounds of chocolate and two months later, her 4-foot-long chocolate pier was finished, complete with gummy bear tourists and mint palm trees. She felt a surge of relief.

By now, the pier has long since been eaten. The only mementos of her creation are a palm tree, a street light made of gumballs and four gummy bears who sit around a chocolate table on her kitchen counter.

Although the pier project reminded her of being an engineer, Cash says she’ll never go back to her former career. For four years, she worked as a project manager for an ocean engineering company. She lived a nomadic existence, moving every six months to the next work site. Her job was like a show on the Discovery Channel – diving into the Panama Canal to locate an underwater rainforest, building artificial reefs, constructing docks in Key West. She liked the pay which enabled her to buy her childhood dream car, a new Jeep. But long hours and empty hotel rooms became her life.

One day, her phone rang. It was her boss. “We have to lay you off,” he said. “I’m coming to get your phone and your laptop tomorrow.”

At first, Cash missed her old lifestyle. But then she viewed it as an opportunity for change. “Your life is worth a lot more than money,” she says. “Since you spend most of your time at work, do what you like regardless of what it pays.”

She likes making chocolate. And she likes the life it gives her.

Cash and her boyfriend just bought a house together. They’re still unpacking their boxes, but this time Cash knows she won’t have to pick up and move again. The new house reflects the colors of the sea – walls are a tropical blue, curtains flutter in the breeze like white-capped waves. “We call it the fish tank,” she says.

In two years, Cash plans to retire from chocolatering. She and Hilts want to travel the world together. If she sees something she likes in a magazine, she cuts it out and pastes it to her “dream board.” The board is covered with images of hot air balloons, zip lines, sailing, and an ad that declares, “It’s time for Australia.”

It may be time for Australia, but for now, Cash is happy creating chocolate. She wants it to make other people happy, too. And it does. While she builds chocolate pianos behind the Schokolad counter, two young women walk into the store. They order mint truffles and coffee with chocolate. “Oh my gosh, so good,” the girl with the ponytail says. “Who doesn’t like chocolate in the morning?”

If you go...

- Address: 401 Central Ave., St. Petersburg, FL 33701
- Hours: Monday-Friday, 8-5. Saturday, 10-5.
- Owners: Mark and Tess Lecato.
- Phone: 727-892-2400