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NEW CHOCOLATE CITY

Artisanal chocolatiers take DC by design and create a culture of cocoa couture

By Amanda McClements

Washington is in the midst of a sweet culture shift. And it has nothing to do with elections. Across the country, artisanal chocolate is closing in on wine and coffee as the next hot luxury food to claim a cult of personalities. And locally, we have our own trendsetters—a homegrown crew of talented, young chocolatiers—who are helping to raise the city's cocoa consciousness.

Rob Kingsbury, who's been seducing Old Town since he opened Kingsbury Chocolates five years ago, is set to launch DC's first chocolate café on 14th Street. Sandra Escobar, a daughter of Mexican immigrants who grew up watching her grandmother grind cacao beans in her home in central Mexico, is working to promote fair-trade farm cooperatives with her blossoming truffle business, The Cacao Tree. And Jason Andelman, a former TenPenh pastry chef, gives customers hands-on experience in chocolate classes held at his Arlington shop, Artisan Confections.

Local chocolatiers, Andelman says, create a personable and delicious spirit of cocoa couture. "What people like about coming in here is that they see me making the chocolates, and there's this connection," he says. His creations come in decadent flavors such as aged bourbon, apricot with Earl Grey and pecan caramel. Some are printed with colorful graphic designs created by local artists and a portion of his sales benefit the arts through a partnership with Arlington Cultural Affairs.

Just what attracts the confectioners to the sweet science? Like music or fashion, they point to the gig's creative nature. "It allows for a form of expression, a meditative outlet and sensory experience through a medium that is irresistible in texture, aroma and taste," says Escobar, whose truffles come in flavors like dulce de leche, cardamom and coconut almond.

Kingsbury—whose great-grandparents' maple sugar farm inspires his recipes—will have a new creative outlet when he opens Artfully Chocolate featuring Kingsbury Confections (ACKC for short) on 14th Street. The shop, a partnership between Kingsbury and Eric Nelson of Del Ray's Artfully Chocolate, will boast a dessert bar, café seating and a glass-walled kitchen. "It's an alternative to the coffee bar," says Kingsbury of the café, which will serve truffles, caramels and hot drinks made with chocolate shavings and infused with lavender, orange peel or chipotle pepper.

Such cocoa capitalization has created new markets, with boutiques such as Chocolate Bar in Manhattan and Chicago's Vosges redefining sweet treats for a savvy new breed of connoisseurs who know Caribbean cacao from Madagascar criollo beans. "Chocolate is moving in the way of wine and coffee," explains Escobar. "Young gourmands are expressing an interest in the slow food movement overall, whether it relates to chocolate, gourmet cheese, fine wine, coffee or microbrews."

Chocolate's rising designer status obviously comes with premium prices. Kingsbury in introducing an organic \$10 bar made with 74% chocolate from cocoa pods picked from naturally growing trees in South America. "People are willing to pay more to have a very nice, luxury piece of food in front of them," he says. Compared with our other luxury vices, \$10 seems easy to swallow. Especially if it's coated in chocolate.

