

Her heart led her to chocolate

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By: **News Tribune**

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Ash, the chocolatier behind 185 Chocolat, works alone in a shared kitchen space in Superior, while a tempering machine with melted chocolate churns in the background. She touches every piece of Triple Chocolate, Caramel Knowledge, Raspberry Silk Mini Heart, or Luscious Lemon-filled Double Heart that drops from her molds.



Heidi Ash, owner of 185 Chocolat, hand paints each of the chocolates she makes. Ash had a heart transplant in 2000; she was No. 185 on the list, thus the name of her company. (News Tribune

“I dream in chocolate, I dream in desserts. I’m very passionate that food be beautiful in presentation,” Ash said. “It used to be enough that chocolate was brown. Now it has to sing in a falsetto. Now it has to shine and sparkle. ... I think chocolate should be edible art.”

If Valentine’s Day is symbolized by chocolate and hearts, Ash would make a good spokeswoman. The lifelong Duluthian was born with a congenital heart defect, and in 2000 received a heart transplant at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester. (“I’ll be 10 years old in March,” Ash said). She followed that same heart to a career in chocolate.

Heart stuff

Ash had her first surgery when she was 5 days old. She spent a lot of time in hospitals and had seven open heart surgeries. She was on the transplant list for just 7½ months, despite the fact that her estimated wait was two years.

This means frequent check ups, she can’t get a tattoo and illegal drugs are frowned upon. Ash can run if chased, but sees no reason to beyond that. No smoking, no drinking, of course.

“Fortunately swearing ... I can still do that,” she said. “The Olympics are a no-go.”

Ash has a master’s degree in counseling and psychological loss, and planned to work with rehabilitating patients who suffered traumatic brain injuries, strokes or other long-term illnesses. She was headed down that career path when she had a change of heart.

"I came to a conclusion. It may be healthier to not be in a hospital environment, even though I knew I could be effective," she said. "So now I deal with potential happiness: Chocolate."

Chocolatier

Ash was wrapped in an apron, her hair tucked back into a stocking cap as she worked recently on filling orders for two weekend gigs: One in Rochester, one in Minneapolis. Her tools were scattered in front of her as she spread glittery color on one of her specialties: Triple Chocolate. She works with just her right hand, and doesn't have complete use of her left because of a stroke she had when she was 14. She uses her left hand to balance chocolate moulds, but said: "I wouldn't put a cup of hot coffee in it."

Ash has a one-liner for everything, and her whimsy sneaks into her creations. She has a mould in the shape of a brain, another in the shape of a heart organ. She takes mandatory dance breaks in her sometimes 20-hour work day, playing Black Eyed Peas or Cole Porter.

She is very precise in her business dealings: She works alone. A portion of her sales goes to the Charity Transplant Fund. She only deals with small companies, and has specifics for optimal display conditions. She won't use corn syrup, large paintbrushes or overlays. She doesn't want to open a store.

"That boggles people so much," Ash said of her personal specifications. "People get so used to going to Target and buying a plate and going to the grocery store and buying a chocolate bar. ... Do you want a chocolate that makes you weak in the knees, or do you want something that sat on a shelf?"

"Everything she touches, she approves of," said glass artist Sheri Murray of Glass Matrix, whose pieces Ash uses to display her chocolates. "[Ash's] not going to try to sell someone on something that she's not happy with herself. ... When you're a one-person show, especially on a time crunch, you try to get things done. You can't really delegate. It can be quite difficult, but also very satisfying that you've taken the time. When someone says 'This tastes fabulous,' there is pride that comes from knowing that you did it all."

The goods

Ash's two show stoppers are Triple Chocolate, a hit with men, and Caramel Knowledge, which she says resonates with women. The former is the size of half a wine cork, with a golden dome. Ash suggests eating the latter — and all chocolate, really — at room temperature. It is a swirl-shaped piece that oozes with caramel. She sells her chocolates on her Web site,

185chocolat.com, and also caters events.

It's the Caramel Knowledge that was the biggest hit at Kippis Tapas Bar, which used to sell Ash's truffles, as well as specialty desserts.

"The reason I like the chocolates was, number one, there were no artificial ingredients in there," said Ari Eilola, co-owner of Kippis. "She took a long time to develop those tastes. She knows how to balance those things out nicely."

Balance is key in Ash's world. She doesn't want to live in a city where she's had open heart surgery. She doesn't want to listen to downer songs on the radio.

"I started making truffles, and I thought that was fun," Ash said. "I wanted to do something fun."