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SWEET **SUCCESS**

CELEBRATED CHOCOLATIER **NORMAN LOVE**
BUCKED THE RECESSION AND IS NOW POISED
FOR REGIONAL AND NATIONAL EXPANSION.

BY **SPENCER CAMPBELL**
PHOTOGRAPH BY **CRAIG HILDEBRAND**



In January 2006,

Norman Love, the celebrity pastry chef and chocolate king of Southwest Florida, told *Gulfshore Business* that an expansion of his Fort Myers candy boutique, Norman Love Confections (NLC), into Naples was imminent. "I visualize a chic, streamlined, New York/sushi bar/jewelry store ambiance," he said. "We'll have more elaborate pastries, a true gelato bar and chocolates I haven't even dreamed up yet. We had originally projected the opening of a Naples store in 2007, but we decided it's worth taking an extra year and doing it right. It's going to be sensational."

Five years later, at press time, there's still no NLC in Naples. In between, of course, Southwest Florida became the first domino in a worldwide economic meltdown. At the time, Love was poised to move into a large retail shop in Naples, a move that "would've been a hemorrhage to me," Love says in hindsight. This isn't to say that Norman Love Confections suffered during the recession. In fact, Love says, retail revenue increased during both 2009 and '10, including a spike of 40 percent last year. His financial advisors, however, warned against the development, telling him to "grab a little pine." Consequently, Love made it through the recession without having to fire a single staffer. This year, NLC's 10th anniversary, Love is ready to get off the bench and reignite his expansion campaign—not only into Naples, but also into the national market.

A reenergized NLC's first objective is to resume its foray into Collier County. Its proposed storefront will be a quaint chocolate salon, a mere 1,200 square feet, with maybe 11 to 12 seats inside and a few more outside at the Parkshore Center plaza on U.S. 41 in Naples, next to U.S.S. Nemo, the highly regarded seafood bistro. The store's chocolates and pastries will be made at Love's Fort Myers factory and shipped to Naples daily, sometimes twice daily. It will serve chocolates, of course, but will focus more heavily on pastries. He's even hired a coming pastry chef to design

and direct the new store's increased selection of desserts. Its official opening date has yet to be determined, but the name is already on the door.

The Naples branch of NLC will be a miniature of the chef's 2006 planned superstore, sure, but it's only the first step, and a tiny one compared with the possible upshot of Love's next venture. A national candy manufacturer, who is not yet ready to be revealed, has hired Love to freshen its image with new bonbons that will appear under the NLC brand. In short, Love will design the chocolates, but the company will make them and sell them in its 86 nationwide stores. Additionally, the two companies hope to establish "co-branded" retail stores that will span the country. What's for sure, right now, is that the company wants 9 million NLC chocolates in its stores during the first year of their partnership.

These, and a few other side projects, are what Love was thinking about on a recent Friday, when he flopped into a chair in his Fort Myers chocolate salon and exhaled a large sigh of relief. The last leg of the Naples expansion was negotiating Collier County's tricky permit requirements, and that part, he just learned, was finally complete. Love battled for weeks, until a good friend and attorney stopped by the salon. "He came in yesterday and said, 'How's the permitting going?' I said, 'I'm banging my head against the wall. They rejected a couple of things, we resubmitted and I'm waiting.' He said, 'Why didn't you tell me?' He made a few phone calls." Love grinned a grin that was five years in the making: "We're all good."

Yes, all seems right in Love's stratosphere. However, now that the expansion is happening, a new uncertainty has arisen, the same uncertainty that creeps into any business's growth. "The question is," says Keegan Gerhard, a premier pastry chef and friend of Love's, "can he duplicate those little pastries, what's in that little case, two to three times over?"



Raised in suburban Philadelphia, a teenage Love was a passionate hockey fan, earning the nickname the "rink rat" because of his reluctance to leave the ice. But at 15, his family moved to Hollywood, Fla., not an area known for its hockey following—at least not in 1973. So, Love went to work washing dishes at a local Chinese restaurant. Within a month he was given a 50-cent raise, to \$2 an hour. But the owner stripped the raise from him when Love bragged about it to a co-worker who, although being much older, did not make as much.

Love's real education came in the kitchen of the Chinese restaurant, where he was fascinated by the style and taste of Chinese cuisine, or, as Love says, "the artisanal opportunity of expressing art through food."

After a year, Love was given his own chance at food prep when a friend's father opened a Swensen's ice cream parlor. Swensen's gimmick was that it produced all of its own ice cream at the store, with customers able to watch through a window into the kitchen. Management dressed Love in a lab coat and tasked him with making the ice cream. It was more a production than anything—he used scientific-looking beakers to mix the compounds, extracts and flavorings—but he was *creating*, nonetheless. After high school graduation, Love set his sights on becoming a dentist, like a long line of Loves before him. But Love, although enrolled in college, didn't attend a single class. Instead, he worked in the Swensen's corporate office, training new managers and opening new stores. "My first real touch into the desserts, sweets, the ice cream: Watching people be happy," Love says.

Later, he applied to the Culinary Institute of America, was placed on a 13-month waiting list, and said "no thanks." Instead, he sought out and apprenticed under the

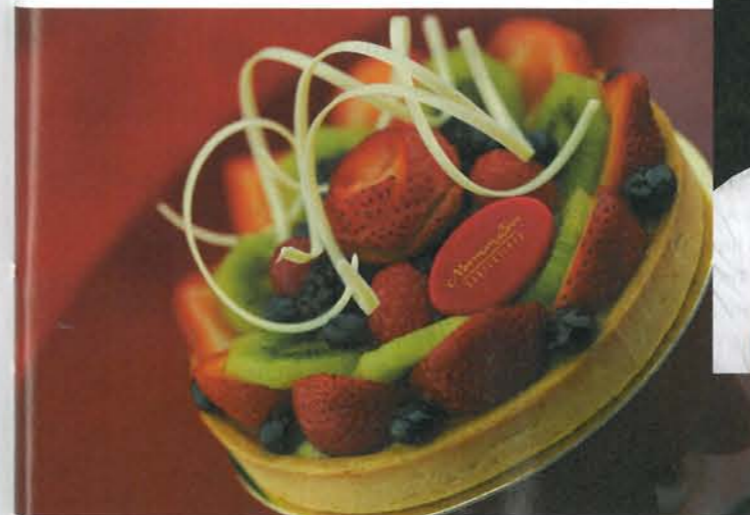
best pastry chefs in the world. Later still, he went to work for the Ritz-Carlton chain of luxury hotels, serving as corporate executive pastry chef, traveling the world, "like a rock star," Love says. He would fly to a new Ritz-Carlton, be picked up in a limousine and be escorted to a suite. But, from there, he was all business. "Norman Love is the most driven person I've ever met," says Gerhard, who worked under Love for almost three years at the Ritz-Carlton, Naples. "He's a perfectionist, which isn't always perfect in the food and beverage business. But he doesn't know any other way to be."

Eventually, after opening more than 20 Ritz-Carltons around the world, Love grew tired of the travel. He missed his wife and two children. So, he settled in Southwest Florida, and made appearances on the Food Network. In 2001, to supplement his income, he started making his

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handmade chocolates in a 700-square-foot office space. NLC pulled in \$200,000 that year. But in 2002, *USA Today* ranked Love's chocolates among the top 10 in the United States, and precipitated a chocolate rush that surprised even Love and his wife, Mary. By 2005, NLC revenues were \$3 million. As part of its 2010 revenue spike, NLC's Internet sales increased another 30 percent.

But most important to Love, he says, remains the quality of his chocolates and pastries, and the warm reception his little Southwest Florida shop keeps receiving from the dessert world's pre-eminent critics attests to his success in that area. In February, for instance, NLC was named the top chocolate in America by *Consumer Reports* magazine; it was the fifth time NLC was ranked No. 1 in the publication's annual Valentine's Day rankings. The first time, *Consumer Reports* mentioned NLC, it was ranked third in the country. "I was pissed," Love says. "It's not about how much, it's always about how good. There's a natural evolution. If you do all the things right—service, products, great staff, good quality, fair price—your business should evolve. Grow. You can't control that."



The future: Nathaniel Reid, NLC's new pastry chef.

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Norman Love calls his Fort Myers headquarters a “factory.” And it is. Love and his army of chocolatiers create 35,000 pieces of handmade, artisan chocolate every day. But “chocolate” and “factory” conjure up images of Willy Wonka, chocolate waterfalls and ompa loompas.

Of course, Love’s factory has no Inventing Room, no lickable wallpaper and no Fuzzy Lifting drink. But Norman Love Confections, like Wonka’s factory, is beautiful. The chocolate salon, which fronts the factory, looks like an upscale New York deli. Hundreds of chocolates masquerading as *objets d’art* sparkle from underneath a glass counter. There are neon yellow hearts, marbled swirls of red and silver, and caramel rectangles as sleek and shiny as bars of gold. And it’s packed with people on a Friday afternoon, more than happy shell out \$4.62 for an ounce of chocolate, or \$15 for five pieces of his dark variety. One pilgrim from Tampa makes her boyfriend pose next to the counter while she takes snapshots of the sweets.

To an outsider, the kitchen looks like every other stainless steel kitchen. Of course, that’s not true to pastry chefs. There’s an airbrush for making graffiti-like decorations, hundreds of plastic models for the chocolate shells, an *I Love Lucy*-esque conveyor belt, and dozens of other tiny, critical flourishes that are indistinguishable to visitors. And central to Love’s expansion plans is the reproduction of this kitchen—



Loving it: Love at his Fort Myers chocolate salon.

ation that’s looking to serve two or three retail outlets.” Critical to NLC’s continuity of quality after the expansion is Nathaniel Reid, the chef Love hired to oversee the increased pastry production in Naples. Reid studied in Paris, before serving as the assistant pastry chef for Joel Robuchon at The Mansion in Las Vegas, and working at the St. Regis in Southern California. And the affection and respect between he and Love is palpable. “Norman’s a leader in our industry,” Reid says. “In my first pastry book, he was the featured chef. This was the opportunity to be part of something special.” Love counters by saying, “He’s on a mission to become the best pastry chef in the country. And it’s going to come.”

Beyond anything else, Love will need to draw on his past to ensure that NLC’s future meets his own standards. He will have to teach and trust others; much in the same manner he did while opening hotels for Ritz-Carlton. “He’s not about making buddies,” Gerhard says. “He’s about making excellence. If I had to bet, I’d say he’ll hire the best, work them the hardest, and make the best.”

But the best evidence of NLC’s continued integrity is that Love’s endgame hasn’t changed since he was a dishwasher in a Hollywood, Fla., Chinese restaurant: The infinite possibilities. “Norman Love Confection’s banana split!” he says on a whim, when speaking of his in-the-future dessert restaurant. “And we all think of Dairy Queen. With three scoops and pineapple, chocolate and whatever that is on there. That’s the perception. But what comes out is this architectural creation. This amazing looking something, something, that has all the components of something, but Tahitian vanilla-infused pineapple with caramelized bananas and the waiters pouring something and it’s ch, ch, ch, ch, ch ... something. That’s what I want. That’s the curtain call.” **gB**

IT’S NOT AN EMPIRE. IT’S JUST A RETAIL PASTRY OPERATION.

twice over. Thirty days after the Naples expansion, he’s going to turn 4,000 square feet in the Fort Myers shopping center across from NLC into a new pastry, bakery and gelato facility. (NLC will sell the gelato at the new Red Sox stadium nearby.) With the national manufacturer demanding 9 million pieces the first year, and NLC’s factory unable to meet that demand (its record is 5.5 million, Love says), the two parties reached an agreement: The company built a kitchen like NLC’s, and Love agreed to teach its chefs his secrets—behind the safety of a strong intellectual property attorney.

Love vows to supervise it all. But, as Gerhard says, “The food and beverage industry is a constant battle between quality and profit. Who in the world would make more than 200,000 handmade bonbons, when a machine can do it twice as fast?” For example, Wolfgang Puck now has “express” locations in airports that serve sandwiches and salads from plastic containers. This food might be good, but it’s probably not Spago, Puck’s first restaurant in Los Angeles.

Love bristles at the idea that he’s forming a Puck-like empire. “It’s not an empire,” he says. “It’s just a pastry oper-