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Photo by Erik Kellar Photography

# The Consummate Chocolatier

*And the accidental start of Norman Love Confections.*

*By Molly McGuire Caldaro*

**Y**ou read that right. Norman Love didn't set out to start a world-renowned chocolate empire. He was "in the business," the television business. In fact, the entire genre of pastry chefs competing on TV can be traced back to the tireless dedication of a man set on excellence. But we should start at the beginning.

Love's passion for art began at an early age, but after receiving a children's cookbook, his preferred medium was decided. "I was inspired by the so many ways to be creative with food to express art on a plate. It's why I pursued the culinary arts," he says. At 14, Love washed dishes in a Chinese restaurant and in high school found a job at an ice cream shop. "There was always something about sweets. When my grandmother and mother were both alive, it was a pretty significant part of a family gathering — the dessert," he recalls. "It made people happy."

The savory side of American cuisine was just taking shape as Love prepared for a career in culinary arts. The artistic Love also wanted a higher level of creativity, so he turned to pastry. "Even today, the smell of fresh croissants and bread baking still excites me," he says.

Love met his wife, Mary, at a bar in Fort Lauderdale 25 years ago. "If you don't believe it happens, it does," he laughs. After the two married, Love was offered a position at the Beverly Hills Hotel. To him, it represented the opportunity to travel to the birthplace of the American culinary movement; an opportunity he seized.

Love then joined the staff of Ritz-Carlton, which was a very different company than it is today, operating only a handful of properties at the time. After a year in St. Louis, he was asked to be the chef at the Naples flagship hotel and assist in opening new properties. As Ritz-Carlton increased the number of new hotels they were opening, it was difficult to do both, so Love chose the Corporate Pastry Chef position. "The sacrifice on a personal level was big. I had two small kids and a wife who was basically a single parent," he admits.

"Opening one hotel is probably more than any one person needs, and I opened 40."

The challenging position took him around the globe. For 12 years Love traveled 40 weeks a year for months at a time. He opened hotels close to home in North America and abroad in Europe, the Middle East and the Pacific Rim. Even if he'd traveled for 20 or 30 hours, once arriving, he would get right to work, often logging 18-hour days.

It didn't matter where he was in the world; chocolate desserts were the most well-received. Love gained a reputation for his frequent use of chocolate. "In a menu of 10 items, six would be chocolate," he says. "Why not give people what they enjoy?" It was one of the key lessons Love learned at Ritz-Carlton: listen to your customers.

In 1999, Love was a member of the three-person team representing the United States in the bi-annual Coupe du Monde de la Pâtisserie in Lyons, France. After 18 months of preparation, the team traveled with a coach, captain and the president of the U.S. organization. "In nine hours in a makeshift kitchen, we created chocolate pieces, ice sculptures, sugar sculptures, chocolate cakes, frozen ice cream cakes and plated desserts," he says, all in front of a chanting crowd. The United States earned a bronze medal in the World Cup, with Love earning second place for his chocolate piece.

Love's friend, who owned Chocolatier magazine, compared the World Cup of Pastry to a tennis event, saying, "There's the French Open, US Open, Wimbledon..." and suggested they start a parallel pastry event stateside. The National Pastry Team Competition began in Beaver Creek, CO in 1999. Two years later, Food Network televised the event and realized that American viewers love to watch pastry chefs work side by side in a competition. In 2003, the competition was moved to Las Vegas and combined with the World Pastry Forum, five days of classes given by the world's best pastry chefs. "It became the most comprehensive week of pastry in the world," says Love.

Food Network ratings were soaring and the network kept commissioning the duo to create more and more challenge shows. Love left Ritz-Carlton to pursue television production, a move that, at 41 with two kids, made him admittedly nervous. "I was able to re-join my family," he says. So, he started a side business making chocolates in his office, 700 square feet in a medical building he got through a friend.

He was clear about his vision for the candies: artistic expressed chocolates with fresh, quality ingredients, never frozen or refrigerated. "Americans eat with their eyes," Love says. Not knowing how to ship them, he delivered them up and down I-75.

Two months later, a USA Weekender would change the course of his life. USA Today had gotten a hold of some of the chocolates and named them the best in the country. The phone started ringing off the hook. "People were trying to find us, and my office was in a medical building," he recalls. "When they did find us, we were sending them to the gas station on the other side of I-75 to get cash because we didn't have a credit card machine."

At the time, Emeril was the number one show on Food Network and Challenge was number two. "I was in the television production business, not the chocolate business," says Love of his understandable reluctance. A few months after USA Today's surprise nod, Godiva called, requesting a line of

chocolates produced just for them. "I laughed and said, 'No, I can't. I'm one guy with one table and I'm in the television production business,'" says Love.

Godiva persisted. He relented and created "G," which turned out to be the biggest product release in Godiva's history. After selling through their initial order of 300,000 pieces, Godiva wanted to order 1.3 million. Love definitely didn't want to make 1.3 million chocolates in his medical building office; he needed a factory.

Love selected inexpensive land near his current office; planning to only wholesale his chocolates, there was no need for visibility. He never intended for the factory to have a retail component, but like the other surprises along the way, the retail side has taken on a life of its own with incredible growth over the last three years. "We feel incredibly blessed," he says. He partnered with Godiva for over eight years, creating millions of "G" pieces, but the

partnership was keeping him from growing his own business, so they no longer work together.

"Chefs in kitchens, competing against each other, that was my concept, but I was a pastry chef. We owned this massive, global competition by getting television visibility. We thought it meant more sponsorship dollars; I never looked at it the other way around, owning the television production," admits Love, who let his partner take over their production business. "We really didn't know what we had back then." A statement that is as true about the TV concept as it is about the first chocolates he made on that single table.

Norman Love Confections is currently celebrating its 10-year anniversary. "We're always flattered to be recognized, but first and foremost, it's 100 percent attributed to the effort of my staff," says Love. "We have an amazing, talented staff that is empowered to be as creative as they can each and

*Norman and Mary Love at their wedding. (right)*

*Love when he was just two months old. (below)*



every day they come to work.” He also admits he’s competitive by nature, “I’m a very self-motivated person who loves challenge, who loves competition and wants the best for everyone inside our walls, for them to be better, to embrace perfection and excellence.

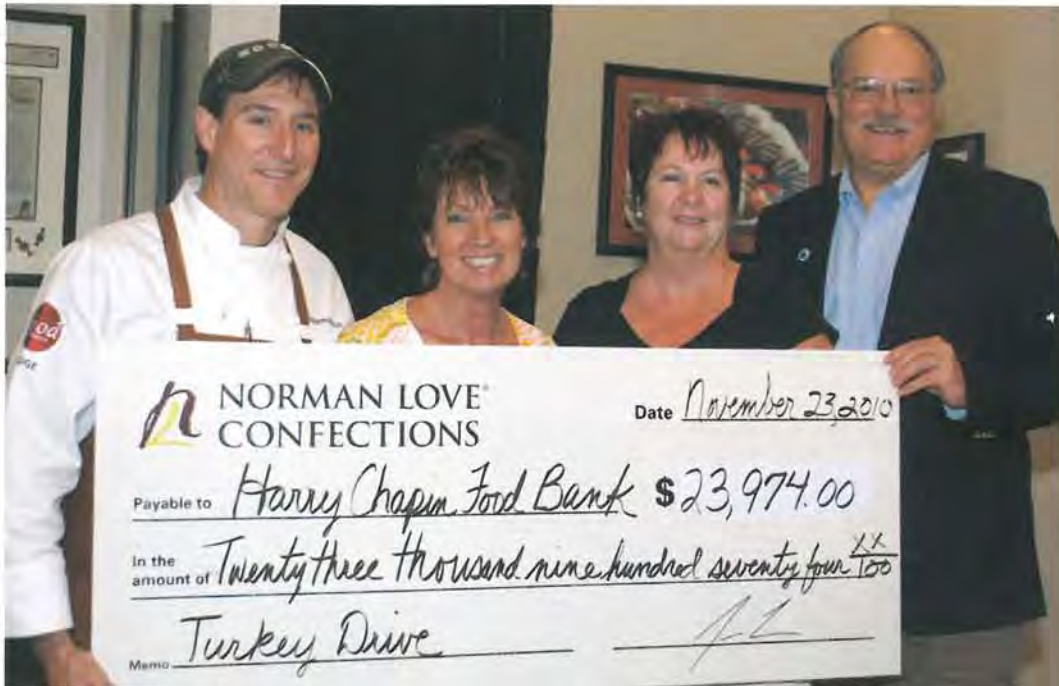
“Oftentimes through life, I’ve heard, ‘I’m going to be successful one day.’ The truth of the matter, and this is what changed me: success is every day and the reward is the future,” he says. “Come to work with purpose. Come to work to be the best. Come to work to be better than anybody. And the reward will come, inevitably, in anything you do.” Love says that giving back to the community is simply habit, and is a way to say thank you for the ongoing, overwhelming local support of their company.

Like many culinary professionals, he struggles to find balance. His son, Ryan, just graduated from the University of Central Florida with a hospitality management degree and is planning to join the company. His daughter, Carly, will be a sophomore at Florida Gulf Coast University in the fall. Aside from the occasional Disney weekend when the kids were little, the Love family has been on vacation once; two years ago they went to Italy. He owns a boat, but can’t remember the last time he was on it. His primary outlet is another childhood love: hockey. “I’m a crazy hockey guy,” he says. “It’s what I enjoy most outside of the hustle and bustle of everyday life.” The Penguins fan plays three nights a week, but he still doesn’t sleep much. And who can blame him? As Love says, “I have to find newer and better ways because the whole industry’s chasing me.”

Currently, Love’s looking beyond chocolate. In a nod to his ice cream roots, both locations will be adding Italian gelato to their menus. He is interested in establishing a gelateria feel for the Fort Myers location and has his eye on a dessert bar format for the Naples location come fall. One thing’s for certain: any new offerings will reflect the pursuit of excellence and quality that’s synonymous with the name Norman Love. *B*



Catie May Stephens decorates a cookie at the Children’s Hospital as Norman Love looks on.



Norman Love, Mary Love, Jo Anna Bradshaw, Harry Chapin Food Bank Board President, and Al Brislain, Harry Chapin Food Bank Executive Director.

Mary Love, Norman Love and Beth Hayes, American Cancer Society of Lee County.

