



An Art-Filled Journey
for the
LOVE
of Chocolate

by Dayna Harpster

Listen WGCU FM will have a special *For the Love of Public Radio* membership drive Feb. 9-11. For a pledge of \$150 or more, Norman Love will send a box of his chocolates to your favorite valentine. (More on page 15.)

If reading about sweets has you thinking about baking, WGCU has programs to fit the bill. **Watch HDTV *Martha Bakes*** @ 10 am Saturdays or ***The Great British Baking Show*** Sundays @ 9 pm.



Norman Love

In recent years, confectioner Norman Love has been honored

by mavens of taste Rachael Ray and Martha Stewart as well as maven of everything Oprah Winfrey. But Julia Child and PBS recognized the star of sweets back in 1996, when Love was executive pastry chef at the Ritz-Carlton in Naples.

Baking with Julia viewers found Love as he showed the iconic chef how he made banana-chocolate beignets as well as savory puffs and eclairs. (To see the videos, go to wgcu.org TV/Watch Now and then search Norman Love.)

Since then, sweet teeth everywhere have learned about the extra-sensory delights – of chocolates both tasty and beautiful – made right in our neighborhood in Southwest Florida. In Norman Love Confections' 6,000-square-foot facility in south Fort Myers, as

many as 55,000 hand-painted gourmet chocolates are made every day and sold to individuals as well as wholesalers for the restaurant and hospitality industries and corporate clients.

It's hard to imagine topping all the honors the confectioner has collected since he began the company in 2001. Love has been recognized locally and globally, from being named to the local Junior Achievement Business Hall of Fame to serving as head jury member at the World Chocolate Masters competition in Paris.

But a generation raised on *The Love Boat* on network TV from 1977 to 1987 might have another reason to be impressed. Or even to consider taking a cruise aboard the Princess Line, the show's inspiration. They'll love the chocolate.

The Princess Line marked its 50th anniversary in November 2014 and also

the beginning of a partnership with Norman Love Confections. "Chocolate Journeys" is bringing Love's custom-crafted desserts, chocolate cocktails, demonstrations and chocolate and wine tastings first to passengers aboard the newly christened Regal Princess and then to the rest of the line's 18 ships. The November event brought the original cast members of the television show – and Norman Love – to the Regal Princess's berth in Fort Lauderdale.

At this point, Love had traveled far from the 700-square-foot space in which he started the business with his wife, Mary. "I remember sitting on the floor trying to figure out how to assemble an Office Depot desk," he recalled recently. "I didn't even have a credit card machine. I remember sending people to the gas station to the ATM. ... And here I had left the best pastry chef job in the country. But I had friends all over and I knew all

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the players from working at the Ritz-Carlton.”

Then and now, he considers himself a chef first and a businessman second.

When he was 16, Love moved with his family to Southwest Florida. That was in 1973. He got a job in an ice cream shop, riding his bike to work for two years. When he graduated from high school, he applied to the Culinary Institute of America, but the curriculum spent a disappointingly short time on pastry. “So I sought out the finest pastry chefs,” he said, perhaps most notably working in the South of France in 1983 and 1984. The artistry possible in pastry was always the irresistible draw to him. “Even making an ice cream sundae I always looked at it as art,” he said. “Americans eat with their eyes. I want that wow factor.”

That’s evident still today in the chocolate salon off Daniels Parkway in Fort Myers, where a dazzling display of color beckons from behind a glass counter of chocolates in flavors such as key lime, vanilla cupcake, pistachio



Norman Love with the original cast of *The Love Boat*: (right to left) Love, Jill Whelan (Vicki, the Captain’s daughter), Bernie Kopell (Doc), Ted Lange (Isaac), Gavin MacLeod (Captain Stubing), Lauren Tewes (Julie), Fred Grandy (Gopher) and Mary Love.

cherry and cinnamon roll, which he admits is his favorite.

Now the company includes 70 employees, two factories, four retail stores, an active Internet business, wholesale enterprise and the Princess partnership. “It’s humbling. Not real to me at times. As a young man I always aspired to have my own business. I have a burning, driving

motivation to be the best, to be better than yesterday,” Love said.

Among chocolate aficionados, he’s now a household name.

At the Fort Lauderdale christening of the Regal Princess in November, cruise line president Jan Swartz said, “The theme of our 50th anniversary is love.” Or maybe it’s Love. ■