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LABOR OF Love

Chocolatier marks 15th anniversary

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The desserts on display at [Norman Love's](#) place might be fakes in their cool modern precision, rows of chocolates as shiny and shapely as jewels, cakes made up as flawlessly as beds at The Ritz-Carlton.

They're not fake, of course, but the illusion still lends a pleasing surprise to biting into a chocolate with intensely real flavors, ones that often play on American themes like lemon bars, peanut butter and jelly and carrot cake.

In October, [Mr. Love](#) (his real name) celebrated the 15th anniversary of [Norman Love Confections](#), which he opened with his wife, Mary. A pastry chef with a penchant for perfection that was honed by 13 years working for The Ritz-Carlton, his career has brought him acclaim as a world-renowned chocolatier.

Southwest Floridians are familiar with his Chocolate Salons, like upscale coffee shops but with a gorgeous array of the best desserts you can imagine. His fourth, in [Fort Myers](#), will include beer and wine. Mr. Love is looking toward offering an afternoon tea, prix fixe evening dessert menu and, sometime after the [Valentine's Day](#) crush, Sunday brunch.

But his chocolates are famous the world over.

It was just weeks after the 9/11 terrorist attacks when Mr. Love opened his first Fort Myers Chocolate & Dessert Salon. He had recently left a corporate job with The Ritz that earned him international notice as a pastry chef. If he was nervous about missing the security of a regular paycheck, he would also finally have more time for his family, including two young children, Ryan and Carly. Looking for a source of income, he started making chocolates.

"I kind of accidentally got in the chocolate business," Mr. Love said.



ABOVE: Norman Love's team creates nearly 7 million pieces of sophisticated, handmade chocolates a year. PHOTOS BY [VANDY MAJOR / FLORIDA WEEKLY](#)



LEFT: Norman Love "accidentally got in the chocolate business," he says.

Struggles during the first year included figuring out how to ship his product from the region's humid climate in the back of [FedEx](#) trucks.

Having initially rented a small space from a friend who owned a home health care business, Mr. Love recalled, he came across a type of container

used to ship medical supplies such as blood. It turned out to work perfectly for maintaining his desserts, even over long journeys in 100-plus degree weather.

During his second year in business, after being named by [USA Today](#) as one of the country's top 10 artisan chocolate makers, business exploded. It was the beginning of a long string of accolades for Mr. Love and his team. They produced 1.3 million pieces of chocolate that year. Meanwhile, Americans' taste for more sophisticated handmade craft products made by chefs with carefully sourced ingredients was on the rise.

These days, Norman Love Confections has a staff of 80-plus employees. Besides cakes, gelato and other goodies, the company produces nearly 7 million pieces of chocolate each year at two [Lee County](#) facilities, or up to 60,000 chocolates per day. Aside from the fillings, done by a machine, each piece is made by hand and contains no preservatives. One of Mr. Love's innovations has been to ramp up production without sacrificing quality.

"People that know me know that compromising the integrity of what we do is not an option," he said.

He was born in [Philadelphia](#) and his family moved to [Hollywood](#), south of [Fort Lauderdale](#), as he was going into the 10th grade. Mr. Love had to give up playing hockey but his affection for dessert, which reaches deep into his early childhood, was always a beacon of his future profession and a source of artistic expression.

"For me it was a way to make people happy, because people always got happy around dessert time," he said.

His entrée into the industry began with a job washing dishes in a Chinese restaurant and then making ice cream at a Swensen's when he was in high school. Later he studied his craft and art at a pastry shop in Lussan, [France](#), and worked for The [Beverly Hills Hotel](#) in [Los Angeles](#) before being hired by The Ritz.

Lately, keeping up with internet business remains a "constant battle." Mr. Love and his team are working to make improvements to his website and are planning to at least triple e-commerce revenue next year.

He also is looking to open shops in the [Tampa Bay](#), [Miami](#) and [Palm Beach](#) areas in coming years. At 56, even after decades in the business and tremendous success, his ambition to continuously improve is baked into his training and maybe his personality.

"I'm not sure I know how to spell complacency," he said. }

— For information on Norman Love, visit www.normanloveconfections.com.