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Experiments show bioengineer may actually be a chocolatier

By Rick Nichols
Inquirer Food Columnist

On a recent afternoon, willowy Rachel Gordon (she has already abandoned Handwerker, her maiden name), 26, and her soon-to-be husband, David Gordon, 27, joined me over a smoothie (her) and falafel wrap (him) at a lunch stand in the Reading Terminal Market.

I'd already had their chocolates - they're really *her* chocolates, though he inspired the ganache infused with Benton's smoked Tennessee bacon - and they are lovely chocolates, dark, and a bit winy in the coating (72 percent); a flake of fleur de sel giving the toothsome caramels, in particular, a lushly soft and salty finish.

The proprietors of r+d chocolate (for research and development, and Rachel and David) are still perfecting their product: Rachel has a standing weekly order of 25 packets of her turtles and caramels and tangy chocolate ganache - two pieces to the packet (\$2) - at the Reading market's Fair Food Farmstand. And she makes another 50 or so pieces to sample to friends. And occasionally small boxes for special orders; a restaurant in Queen Village seems interested. (Her own wedding is interested, too.)

So they are not exactly Asher's. Nor is it the moment - not with just months of intense chocolate research under her belt - to quit her day job, which is organizing scientific conferences for the American Association for Cancer Research. She is a newly minted Ph.D. in bioengineering; she worked on chemical delivery systems for gene therapy.

But something else has been calling. She began with cupcakes. She'd take three recipes from, say, Cook's Illustrated, or King Arthur Flour, and sample them at a blind tasting. Then she'd take the winner and change one ingredient at a time - maybe the amount of eggs, or yolks, or flour. Then she'd sample them out again, color-coding the cupcake liners.

She used precision lab technique: sensitive scales, digital thermometers.

"Then I woke up one morning," she says, "and I decided it was time to eat a truffle." It was a lightbulb moment. She'd had a profound attraction to chocolate from the time he met her, says David, who is studying the philosophy of language. What neither of them realized was her aptitude for chocolate-making.

Was she really a chocolatier trapped in a bioengineer's body? "We didn't think she'd get so good so fast," says David.

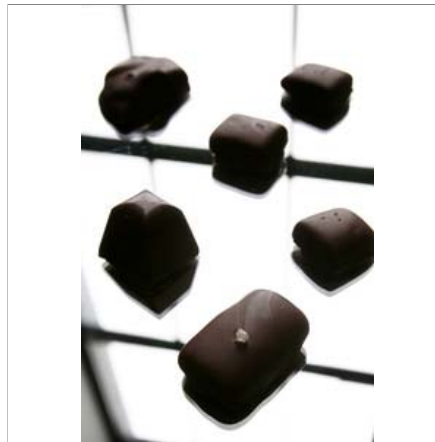
She makes the chocolates that she sells at a friend's restaurant kitchen on Passyunk Avenue. But she experiments at home in Center City, using local cream and butter and raspberries; making two ganaches, for instance, then tweaking one - "changing one iteration," and watching in shock and awe at the difference.

She tried out the turtle on David's father, a Hershey bar man. He found the caramel too chewy. The next batch? He said the squares were un-turtle-like. Then they were too big. Then she quartered them, softening the caramel, dry-roasting the marcona almonds.

Rachel likes to watch people's faces when they eat the chocolate to catch their involuntary reaction - to pick up an eyebrow arching, a nostril widening, the first tiny glint of a smile.

She watched David's father after the final turtle: "I look for that face. And this face wasn't a 'This is just food face.' It was, 'This is the perfect turtle face!'"

So what was a science project has taken on deep aspects of the humanities, vulnerable to whimsy, shaped by delight, giving rise to a surprising image: "I picture myself," Rachel says, "in a storefront."



ERIC MENCHER / Inquirer Staff Photographer

r+d chocolates are the creation of Rachel Gordon, a bioengineering Ph.D. who has seen a chocolate store in her future.

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look up," she says, "and it's 1 a.m."

Choices don't get much clearer than that.

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