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WHAT'S HOT: Chef Stef's chocolate is Shore's sweetest

In this particular line of our work -- judging chocolate in an annual overloading frenzied celebration of the stuff -- that's saying something.

By Tim Grobaty, Staff Writer
 Posted: 02/23/2009 09:16:30 PM PST

[GALLERY» Chocolate Festival on Second Street](#)

THE SWEET -- AND SOUR -- TASTE OF SUCCESS: Do you ever wonder what you look like to other people? Possibly because we don't look in the mirror an awful lot, we happily plod through life imagining oneself to be a regular-size guy who happens to have an affinity for giant shirts.

But, sometimes we have to wonder, as we did Saturday afternoon, when we took a break from yardwork, napping and dog-doctoring to don our culinary/judicial robes in our capacity as judge of the Belmont Shore Chocolate Festival.

As always, Justin Rudd, one of our colleagues on the bench and the king of the Shore, was in attendance, and we were discussing the event's proceedings in our typically wise and somber manner, when a young woman came over to interrupt so she could gush at Rudd, telling him how much she admired him and all that he does and - "I love your body!" - then, suddenly noticing an annoying presence, Ms. Gush turned and gave us an up-and-down look for a long couple of seconds, as if trying to dredge up some compliment, but the effort to come up with a remotely credible mistruth proved too much for her and she finally was resigned to a barely audible, "Hi," before turning back to hopping up and down in front of Rudd.

Which isn't to say Justin's not a great guy, because

he is. He just wears his shirts a little smaller than we like, is all. But he has great taste, as was proven at the end of Judgment Day, when the two of us had decided very much in favor of the two chocolate inventions of Belmont Shore's Stefanie Kelly.

All the judges picked as best unique dessert her Java Drops, an intense blast of dark chocolate and espresso that captures the very essence of the two highly addictive flavors that stage a near-violent argument on the battlefield of your taste buds about which is the best.

Our No. 1 chocolate taste of the day, however, was Kelly's Balsamic Vinegar-Infused Chocolate Drops, which had our mouth's eyes bugging out in surprise that bordered on shock, our flavor receptors

doing a whiplashy double-take at the bickering yet complementary flavors of the two main ingredients. It was, we told her, forgetting for the moment that we were supposed to be a soulless and stone-faced adjudicator, the best thing we ever had!

And in this particular line of our work -- judging chocolate in an annual overloading frenzied celebration of the stuff -- that's saying something.

Generally, we come away from these affairs a little unimpressed and utterly over-sweetened. This time, we went back to Kelly's table for more. And we would do it again -- need to do it again. The idea of having chocolate without a balsamic vinegar infusion doesn't appeal to us at all now. One fun-size bite and we're a squalling choco-vinegar addict.

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Happily, getting Kelly's chocolate is turning into a real possibility. The 39-year-old dean of students at Carson High School is starting up a business, Chef Stef Candy Co.

It's something she's slowly been developing since she won a first-place award in the unique dessert category at the 2007 Belmont Shore Chocolate Festival for a chocolate, oatmeal cookie, peanut-butter, caramel, pecan and more chocolate diet wreck called a Schmookie. We were a judge in '07, so we must have sampled it, but the Schmookie name doesn't ring a bell. Maybe if she'd thrown in a little balsamic vinegar ...

Kelly, who hasn't had a lick of training in candy-making, recently acquired a business license and is renting out a kitchen to build her inventions aboveboard. So far, she's been selling mostly to friends and people at school, but she plans on going hog wild soon, with a Web site and finding outlets for her treats.

"I started out just making some things at home and bringing them into work, and people would ask me if I sell them, and I'd say, 'Sure, if you're buying.' "

She could do well enough, probably, just working the gray market, apart from the omnipresent tax man and the giant tomes of health department regulations, but she felt the need to buy a license and go the honest route.

"A dean's job is basically busting kids," she explained, and it needed explaining, because we never got in trouble in high school. "And I am always catching kids selling candy at school, and I have to tell them that they can't sell candy without a license, so I couldn't in good faith sell candy without a license."

Now, she's looking for coffee shops, restaurants and other outlets for her chocolates, at least a couple of which will be festooned with a sticker proclaiming them to be "The Best in Belmont Shore." And the judges concur.

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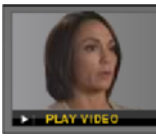
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