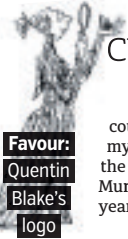


Making chocolate for a living - now, that's a sweet job! How did you get into it?

I loved chocolate throughout my childhood and was obsessed with Crunchie and Freddo Frogs. I got a job at Harrods selling chocolate when I was 19 and that was the beginning of my journey. I worked there for three years, selling the best chocolate to rich people. Michael Caine was my first customer - he was buying Milk Tray for his mum!

How did things progress from there?

I had a light-bulb moment at Harrods in 1981 when I realised customers wanted emotional engagement with chocolate. I then started creating ideas that had stories and character. I did a short business



TIPS FROM THE TOP

With chocolate maker **Chantal Coady**

THE BUSINESSWOMAN, 62, ON THE JOYS OF CREATING A LUXURY BRAND, THE PAIN OF LOSING IT ALL - AND THE CHALLENGE OF STARTING AGAIN

course, set out my plan, then my mother backed me by putting the family home up for security. Mum got the deeds back a few years later.

When did it take off?

There was a buzz about Rococo from the start. We launched Rococo on the King's Road in Chelsea in 1983. Locals loved us and the press wrote

stories. Then celebrities knew about us and, before long, major brands such as Liberty, Heal's and The Conran Shop wanted our chocolate, as well as British Airways and Virgin Atlantic. Famous people came in all the time. Paul Newman, Ralph Fiennes, Cate Blanchett, Kate Winslet... Paul McCartney and the Rolling Stones were regulars. Young royals told me that when they gave the Queen Rococo chocolates, she instantly locked them away in a special cupboard!

Your tastiest creation?

Golden Milk Sea Salt was the best seller at Rococo for many years. I came up with the recipe in 1998 when I was paddling in the surf with my son during a holiday in Cornwall. I was pregnant with my second child and eating a Cornish clotted cream ice cream. My tase buds were also alive with sea salt crystals. It was a moment of inspiration!

Can you give us an example of creative thinking that saved the day?

Just before Christmas one year we had an 'overstock' of large gold-foiled chocolate bears that weren't selling. A young worker suddenly had the idea of making each bear a sleeping bag out of tissue paper and calling the product Ted In A Sleeping Bag. They suddenly started flying out and we sold the lot. This example goes right back to my plan to create chocolate with stories because people want an emotional attachment. It really does work.

Mistakes, you've made a few...

One memorable one happened about ten years ago when we had two full pallets of beautifully packaged chocolate waiting on the tarmac in Dubai to go to a new Harvey Nichols store. The shipment was worth about £12,000 but there was a mix-up with customs or something and it was left on the tarmac in the blistering heat. It all melted to mush.

You are the only person to get an OBE for 'services to chocolate'. How did that feel?

To have a category created especially for me was humbling. Prince William presented it to me in 2014 and said, 'How wonderful to get an honour for making chocolate!' We both roared with laughter. This year I was asked to be chair of the Academy of Chocolate in London.



You suddenly left Rococo in 2019 after 36 years. Why?

It is an incredibly complicated and painful story. I had an opportunity to step away from the business side of things so that I could concentrate on the more creative side, which I took. Rococo had five luxury shops and had been valued at £10million in 2016 but by June 2019 it went into administration in debt. I got absolutely nothing for a lifetime's work. It has been a harrowing experience that took me to the brink, both emotionally and financially. Losing Rococo was like watching everything I loved being thrown off a cliff. There is still a legal situation, so I cannot say much more, but I am a positive person and I am focusing on the future now.

TOP TIP
'Be extremely careful who you invite into your business and beware of a tactic they call "loan to own". It is lethal'

How did you manage to bounce back?

During lockdown I suddenly started making chocolate again in my kitchen for a few friends. Returning to my core love was completely healing and quite magical. Then I had the idea for The Chocolate Detective.

Who - and what - is The Chocolate Detective?

I am the Detective! I draw on decades of experience to seek out the world's finest chocolate makers and connect them to chocolate lovers. I have developed recipes of my own and I curate bird's eggs, olives and almonds. The puffin and robin eggs are our biggest sellers.

THE FACTS

CHOCOLATIER

SALARY: I'm sorry to say that the Rococo debacle cleaned me out financially. This new business is my passion and all profits go back into it

REGULAR HOURS? Too many to count. I often work seven days a week but every hour is a joy and my labour of love

SHORT AND SWEET ADVICE: Be true to yourself and you will find a way through

How has the business doing?

It has been amazing. The artist Quentin Blake, who loved Rococo, created my logo as a favour and many of my old customers are coming to me. I wept when we got a huge order from a loyal buyer from the Rococo years.

What are your plans for the business?

I want The Chocolate Detective to lead the way for best practice in the chocolate industry so that the farmers who grow the cocoa benefit directly from their hard work.

INTERVIEW BY ROB MCGIBBON

The Chocolate Detective will be at Chelsea Physic Garden Christmas Fair on November 25-28. chocolatedetective.co.uk

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