



Lauren Brophy "chocolatizes" an apple that's already covered in layers of caramel, chocolate and peanuts. Below left, varieties of candy apples on display. Below right, an apple receives an extra layer of chocolate. KAREN MANCINELLI/FOR NJ PRESS MEDIA

APPLES

Continued from Page B1

caramel, milk and white chocolate."

The apple pie apple features two layers of white chocolate, cinnamon and sugar. Meanwhile, the Who Turned Out the Lights? apple delivers caramel with dark chocolate chips and dark chocolate.

Walnuts and marshmallows are rolled into wet caramel for the rocky road apple. After it all dries, the chocolate is applied.

Apples cost \$7 to \$9.50 at the store. If ordered online, they cost \$8 to \$12.50 and are made fresh the day they ship.

The 500-square-foot colorful shop looks and smells like a fantasy candyland — it also carries elaborately chocolate-dipped pretzels and other goodies — and the staff, who call themselves expert chocolatiers, have a ball.

But it's an enterprise borne of hard work.

Brophy, who works on Wall Street, and Petroski, who works for an international food company, committed to their corporate jobs. Additionally, they've been running the past since 2003 and, for the last six years, the candy apple shop.

On the weekdays they report to the office, they're up at 4:30 a.m. and don't return till 8:30 p.m., leaving the staff to handle the candy.

But both women say their greatest joy comes from providing a plush place for their in-guests to relax on the weekends and making the caramel apples.

"In our corporate jobs, we aren't the most popular people," Brophy said. "I'm a regulator. Nobody wants to see me. Leigh's a controller. Nobody wants to see her. Nobody's asking us to go to lunch."

"But here in the shop," she added, "people are predisposed to be happy. Candy's fun. Who doesn't like candy?"

On every vacation, Brophy said, she seeks out a candy shop. Her favorite at the Jersey Shore is Jenkinson's Sweet Shop in Point Pleasant Beach.

Candy's always in demand

The past two years were breakout years for the Candy Apple Shoppe, Brophy said.

It's no wonder. The American nonchocolate confectionery market grew 28 percent from 2005 through 2010, according to Mintel International, a market research firm that estimates American retail sales will reach \$7 billion in 2015.

Consumers are buying

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» Candy Apple Shoppe, www.candy-apple-shoppe.com and www.facebook.com/candyappleshoppe

candy even in a down economy, the Mintel report speculates, because they view it as an indulgence they can afford. Driving sales are product innovation and products made with real fruit, both specialties at the Candy Apple Shoppe.

The shop has won some corporate contracts. Holiday varieties, for instance, were mailed nationwide to buyers for Saks Fifth Avenue, Nordstrom and Dilard's department stores, according to Brophy.

"We also do gourmet apple peddling favors," she said. "That's a big component of our business model right now."

The treats make their way from the little shop in the valley to weddings at such far-flung places as The Boston Museum, The Plaza in Manhattan, Pleasantdale Chateau in West Orange and Perona Farms in Andover.

The Candy Apple Shoppe also lovingly provides all holidays year round.

And so the need for the late-night candy apple-making sessions. During busy times, the shop produces 500 apples a day, Brophy said, and the three tempering machines — for milk, dark and white chocolates — work overtime.

Creativity takes the lead

"The apples are a lot of fun to make and a good amount of work," said Lori Bevacqua, one of the shop's chocolatiers. "But you can add in your artistic abilities."

Creativity in the layers of an apple can be a weighty thing at the Candy Apple Shoppe, where the heaviest apple weighs in at a hefty 2.75 pounds.

It's a blast to experiment with all the different flavors of gourmet caramel apples, Petroski said.

"But it's the relationships we have forged with our customers and guests that are without a doubt the most rewarding," she said.

The two businesses are synergistic, according to their owners. The shop has become an ecotourism destination, particularly during autumn foliage season when Sussex County is ablaze in color.

"We have people who drive here from far away just to buy our apples," Brophy said, "and now they're staying at our bed



and breakfast."

Hiking abounds in the area at Wawayanda State Park and Boardwalk section of the Appalachian Trail, just down the road from the inn. Guests also enjoy the nearby quaint village of Warwick, N.Y., and the Warwick Valley Winery & Distillery.

Eventually, though, most people wind up in the Candy Apple Shoppe to watch the chocolatiers at work or try their finished products. They're even impressed by experiments and mistakes.

"It's all trial and error," Brophy said. "We had an apple called the Nestlé Crunch Bomber. It was a caramel apple and we put Nestlé Crunch on it, then chocolate. Those combinations didn't kick it."

Then there was the time somebody dropped a peanut butter cup apple into the chocolate tank.

"It weighed so much, it was ridiculous," said Brophy, adding that she sold it to a customer at the usual price. "The next week, doesn't she come back and ask if there's any other mistakes!"

The shop and inn, where the rooms are named after varieties of apples, also feature inspirational sayings carved on rustic wood wall placards. One in particular sums things up pretty well: "How do you like them apples?"

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For Leigh Petroski and Lauren Brophy, their two Vern businesses are synergistic, with the apple shop becoming an ecotourism destination, particularly in autumn, when autumn foliage is ablaze in color. Below, the Candy Apple Shoppe nestles next to the Apple Valley Inn. KAREN MANCINELLI/FOR NJ PRESS MEDIA

