



## Checking into the Hotel Chocolat in Chestnut Hill

By Bob Tremblay/Daily News staff

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NEWTON — Chocoholics may check into Hotel Chocolat - and never want to check out.

Who could blame them? Among the store's many offerings are an organic dark chocolate bar made with 100 percent cocoa and an organic milk chocolate bar made with 62 percent cocoa. In case you're curious, a typical American chocolate bar contains less than 10 percent cocoa while the smallest amount of cocoa in a Hotel Chocolat product is 30 percent.

The high cocoa quotient is in keeping with one of Hotel Chocolat's credos: "Less sugar, more cocoa."

"By reducing the amount of sugar and using only the best cocoa, we let the real cocoa flavors shine through in all of their goodness and glory," says Nicki Doggart, the company's U.S. CEO.

The luxury chocolatier also has a "no nasties" policy so that such undesirables as additives and preservatives never even get into the hotel's lobby. "That's all about our commitment to premium all-natural ingredients," says Doggart. "We use only the good stuff, only what you'd expect to go into good chocolate. We don't have to cover it up with lots of sugar and additives.

"We're also cocoa growers. We have our own cocoa estate so we understand what it means to go from bean to bar. We know the importance of handling the product, getting the raw materials and getting the process right every step of the way so that the end result is worthy."

In the past, chocoholics would have had to travel to England, where the company was founded about 20 years ago, to sample Hotel Chocolat's wares. That situation changed in September when the company opened its first U.S. store on Newbury Street in Boston. Success was so, well, sweet that it opened a second store in November in the Mall at Chestnut Hill.

More stores are coming. "These are the first of many," says Doggart without divulging where these stores would be or when they would open.

The company also plans to open an actual hotel in May on the Caribbean island of St. Lucia - home of the aforementioned cocoa estate. "It will be a boutique hotel made up of six lodges, a restaurant committed to local cooking methods and spa services," says Doggart. "It's all about barefoot luxury in a casual atmosphere. It will be a place for pampering and relaxation. There will be cooking classes and tours of the estate, and guests can harvest cocoa pods, too."

More details, such as room prices, will be coming in the near future.

Hotel Chocolat (pronounced shok-o-la) was founded by two British entrepreneurs, Angus Thirlwell and Peter Harris, who were dismayed over the mediocre quality of chocolate in United Kingdom stores and decided to do something about it. The company started in Royston, England - near Cambridge - as a mail-order business originally called Choc Express. "At the time, it described what they did well," says Doggart. "From a catalog perspective, you want chocolate and you want it delivered quickly."

Matters began evolving when the company launched its Web site in the late 1990s. "The vision Angus and Peter had developed for the company really outgrew Choc Express," says Doggart. "In 2003, they selected 'Hotel Chocolat' because it's a bit of a sexy name. It's also all about a full experience. It's about an escape. It's about being good to yourself. When we travel and treat ourselves to a hotel for a vacation, we treat ourselves to some pampering.

"Like a hotel is more than just a bed and a room, this concept includes everything. It's the experience with the whole brand. It's the experience of walking into the shop and getting a multi-sensory experience - the chocolates, the artifacts from the cocoa estate.

"Then there's the beautiful packaging. To get to the chocolate you have to open it. It's all about the art of the reveal. We pay attention to details to ensure our customers, our guests enjoy this holistic chocolate experience rather than 'Here's a box of chocolates, rip the top off, see a brown cardboard box and shove the chocolates in your mouth.' There's something to be said for that, but that's not what we're about."

Hotel Chocolat opened its first store in Watford, England - north of London - in 2004 and now operates 44 stores in the U.K.

The decision to expand across the pond was made after researching the matter to see, for example, if room existed in the marketplace for a luxury chocolatier. "For many people around the world, the U.S. holds quite a bit of allure as far as the size of the opportunity," says Doggart, a Wisconsin native with a background in global sales and marketing management.

Hired to launch U.S. operations, Doggart incorporated the company in 2007 on... irony alert... July 4.

Boston was chosen as the location for its first U.S. store because "the city has a fantastic demographic," says Doggart. "It has a very discriminating, cosmopolitan and sophisticated population. It's also a foodie place where folks are concerned about where their food comes from. They want to know that it has the good stuff in it rather than all of the 'nasties.'

"Yes, some of these pieces are found in other cities across the U.S., but Boston really brought them together uniquely and in a commercial environment that made sense for our strategy - to get it right. Boston is such a European city, too. It was a good fit on so many levels."

After settling and prospering in Boston with much of the success garnered through word of mouth, Hotel Chocolat took a look at the surrounding area for another location. "We were really impressed with what the Chestnut Hill area had to offer," says Doggart. "As far as the other stores that were there, the fact that Bloomingdale's chose Chestnut Hill - it's the only Bloomingdale's in New England - that spoke volumes. Chestnut Hill has a very discriminating, sophisticated, cosmopolitan customer, too, and the Mall at Chestnut Hill has a feel of exclusivity to it that was attractive to us. It also enables us to test the mall concept in the U.S."

As far as profits go, "sales have exceeded our expectations," says Doggart, without getting into specifics. "We've been warmly received in the Boston area. We're here to stay."

In addition to the authenticity of its products, Hotel Chocolat has two main ingredients that differentiate it from other chocolate companies, says Doggart.

"Number one is innovation and originality that can be seen in the breadth of products that we've got and the fun types of things we do," she says. "We don't just do bars of chocolate as many cocoa growers do. There are also many chocolatiers out there that take themselves, quite frankly, way too seriously. Hotel Chocolat recognizes and embraces the fact that chocolates's fun. It makes people happy.

"We give people a real chocolate experience they've never had before with a serious dose of the British sense of humor. For example, the name of one of our slab products is the Triple Chocolate Wham Bam. And our Rather Large Cracker comes filled with chocolates, party hats and groan-worthy jokes. On the outside of the package of the jokes is a warning: 'May not contain humor.'

"The final piece is our ethics. We have a 'do the right thing' type of mantra. We use recyclable materials in our packaging, but the real headline here is our Engaged Ethics Program. It started with a desire to give back to the cocoa farmers and cocoa growers and

improve their lives. We looked around and decided there wasn't an existing program out there that was a good fit for us so we created our own.

"Seventy cocoa growers already participate in the program in St. Lucia. In exchange for participating and signing up to growing cocoa using best practices, such as no pesticides, we guarantee we will buy their entire harvest, pay them 40 percent above market rates and pay them within a week.

"In contrast, previously cocoa farming in St. Lucia, by and large, was not an economically viable way to make a living. They'd spend six months growing and then harvesting, but there was no guarantee anyone would ever buy their product, and if somebody did, they were never in a position of power to get a fair price for all their hard work and the fantastic cocoa they grew. And when they did get paid, it was about six months later.

"Can you imagine doing all of this work and not getting paid anything for six months? You can't support your family on that so we've turned that on its head. One, it's the right thing to do, but two, we get fantastic local support. We're making a real impact in the community, which is really important to us, and we get fantastic premium cocoa from St. Lucia, which hadn't been a huge cocoa producer for many years."

In addition to St. Lucia, Hotel Chocolat gets cocoa from the African country of Ghana, one of the world's largest cocoa producing countries, as well as other premium cocoa growers around the globe.

Product prices range from \$5 for a heart-shaped chocolate lolly, just in time for Valentine's Day next month, to more than \$100 for such items as the 65-piece Chocolatier's Table.

Big sellers include products from The Purist collection such as the aforementioned 100 percent Organic Dark Chocolate Bar (\$10).

The Boston store also houses the only Hotel Chocolat chocolate tasting room. These tastings cost \$50 per person and are by appointment only. For the Purist collection, the sommelier at L'Espalier has put together a wine pairing program.

One might have trouble imagining folks sipping a Merlot while chewing on a Tootsie Roll.

#### HOTEL CHOCOLAT

Co-founders and co-owners: Angus Thirlwell and Peter Harris

U.S. addresses: The Mall at Chestnut Hill, 199 Boylston St. (Rte. 9 west), Chestnut Hill, and 141A Newbury St., Boston

Employees: About 20 for both stores

Hours: Chestnut Hill - Monday through Friday 10 a.m. to 9 p.m., Saturday 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. and Sunday noon to 6 p.m.; Boston - Monday through Saturday 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. and Sunday noon to 6 p.m.

Phone numbers: Chestnut Hill - 617-244-0070; Boston - 617-391-0513

Web site: [www.hotelchocolat.com](http://www.hotelchocolat.com)

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