



Out & About

Choc-full

It's widely believed that chocolate is an aphrodisiac and that some dark varieties are good for you, but most of us don't need a scientifically proven excuse to devour it – the delightful taste is reason enough.

Words by Donna Peters

Out & About – Choc-full



While the supermarket selection may satisfy your cravings, it can't be compared to the delectable treats found at the Blue Mountains Chocolate Company. Visitors to the shop are invited to taste the delicious morsels and one is never enough. "There is always dark, milk and white chocolate to choose from as well as whatever else we are making that day," says the business owner, Claire Preen. "Sometimes there's toffee or fudge, honeycomb or a flavoured chocolate bar." With such a luscious variety to pick from, you feel like – well, a kid in a candy store!

And if the rows upon rows of chocolates on display don't tempt you to break your diet, one glance into the kitchen will do the trick. People are rarely able to keep from swooning after viewing the head chocolatier – Didier Lanoote, from Brussels – work his magic. "We have a lot of people 'ooh and aah' over our chocolates," Claire grins. "They look so pretty and you can see the work and effort that goes into them." But it's not all about show. Sure they have a beautiful exterior but as the old saying goes, it's what's inside that counts. "We use some of the best couverture in the world for our chocolates," she remarks, and we always use fresh ingredients and natural flavourings, which makes them quite exquisite."

After witnessing such a demonstration you will undoubtedly want to get in on the action and mould some cocoa for yourself. The Blue Mountains Chocolate Company conducts regular courses, letting customers put on an apron and learn how to make their own tantalising treats. Although Claire does warn everybody who attends to be prepared to get covered in the stuff, this doesn't serve as much of a deterrent for those eager to satisfy their sweet tooth. "The classes are very hands-on," she explains. "The people who attend them are taught the basics of how chocolate works and the chocolatier demonstrates how to make some of the easier ones – such as truffles – with basic kitchen utensils. So by the end of it people can make their own at home."

But don't expect to learn all the secrets because some of the scrumptious recipes are never revealed – even Claire is left pondering a couple of them. "Two of the chocolates Didier makes are kept secret even from me," she confides. "They are the Duke of Praline and the Duchess of Praline – they're ones that have been handed down to him." And those who are fortunate enough to taste them have something in common with former US Presidents Bill Clinton and George Bush. That's right – some of the most powerful men in the world have had their hearts melted by Didier's delights. "He worked in several five-star establishments in Washington DC where he created desserts and pastries for heads of state and embassies," Claire says proudly. "He has also won many awards, he's very artistic and skilled in the art of making chocolate."

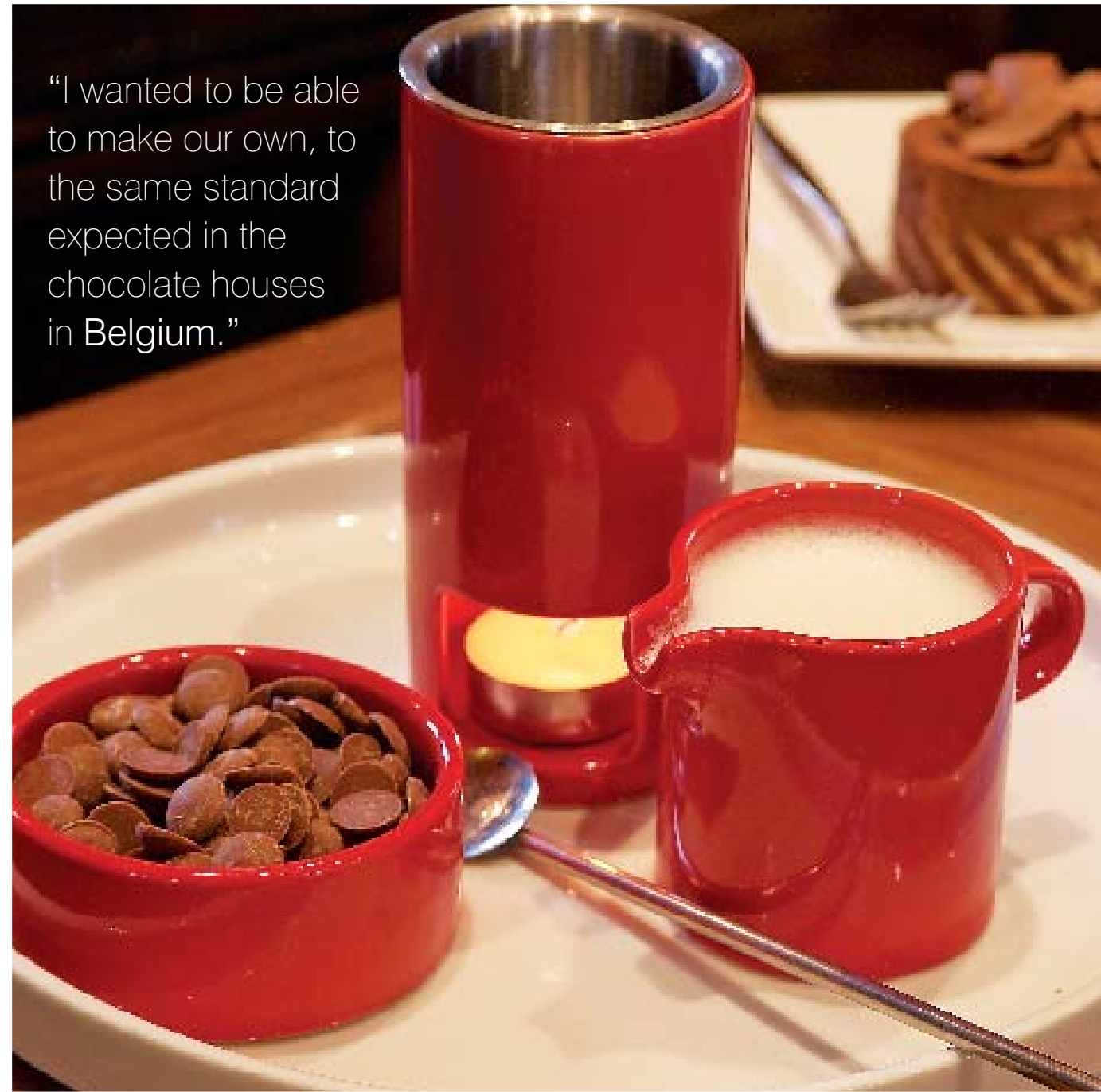
Most visitors to the Blue Mountains Chocolate Company develop an insatiable appetite – but not only for the sweets themselves. The shop is packed with chocolate memorabilia and tidbits and it's hard to not be captivated by them. "I think people love learning about the history behind it and how it is made," Claire comments. "The facts you pick up are fascinating and



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they're not generally known." So is chocolate like wine, the more knowledge you have the greater your enjoyment? "Maybe," she muses. "I think that knowing it was once such an exclusive and expensive commodity – even when it was a dark, bitter drink – may make people appreciate the fact that it is now affordable and readily available."

Claire still remembers when it wasn't easy to find fine chocolates in Australia and the distress it caused her when she first settled here. "Coming from Europe I noticed it was difficult to get quality handmade chocolates unless they were imported," she reflects. "I wanted to be able to make our own, to the same standard expected in the chocolate houses in Belgium." And it's lucky for us she decided to take action and turn her dream into reality.

She has been serving delicious sweets for so long now she believes she can guess accurately what a person likes.

"If somebody speaks with a European accent they tend to go for the dark and milk chocolates rather than the white ones," she states, "and Aussies are a mix of all three – but with a slight leaning towards white." It may not be an exact science but with her wealth of experience she's pretty confident she is correct.

There's no doubt, however, that whatever chocolate you select from the Blue Mountains Chocolate Company you will be licking your lips and asking for more. Perhaps one visitor summed it up best. After tasting one of Didier's masterpieces she closed her eyes and said, "ooooh, that's better than my honeymoon!" ♦