

Sweet Life

For her second act, alum and former physician Elaine Hsieh creates artisan chocolates

By Cynthia K. Buccini

Step into Somerville's EHChocolatier and as you gaze into the glass case of honey caramel bonbons, brown butter toffees, coconut creams, and chocolate chews, you may notice a slight chill in the air.

Founder Elaine Hsieh keeps the 1,100-square-foot kitchen, in a former factory building, at about 68 degrees. Chocolate is finicky, sensitive to temperature and humidity.

"It has a very small window where it's happy," says Hsieh (CAS'90, MED'90).

Inside the kitchen, the equipment keeping the chocolate happy—the air conditioner, freezer, fridge, cooling cabinet, and tempering machines—thrum and whirl. Here, Hsieh and cofounder Catharine Sweeney, along with two full-time employees, produce 1,000 to 2,000 chocolates a day.

The chocolates have made several "best of" lists, in *Boston* magazine and *Food & Wine*, among others. The *New York Times* included the confections in a 2013 article titled "The Best in the Box." They made Martha Stewart's "15 Valentine's Day Chocolates to Swoon Over."

"Our job is to make them exceptional," says Hsieh (pronounced "SEE-ya"). "Our toffee has won several awards. We brown the butter, which changes the flavor,



and we take it so much darker than anybody is willing to take it." That makes the flavor nuttier, she says, "toasty, more robust, and deeper."

Making chocolates isn't the path she was supposed to take. Hsieh, her brother, and two sisters were expected to become doctors, lawyers, or engineers. Her parents, immigrants from China, "frequently and regularly reminded us that if you were born in China, you would be

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of no worth. So, we should take advantage of being in the United States, where anybody can have a great education as long as you worked hard. I think it's a classic story for many immigrant families, especially families from China."

Hsieh was accepted to BU's six-year medical program, but by her first year at the School of Medicine, she began to doubt her choice of career. "I had



my existential moment: maybe it's not for me." She confided in her oldest sister, a graduate of the six-year medical program at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, who told her, "Don't you even think about stopping. It will kill your parents."

She stayed in the program—and went on to complete a residency in internal medicine at the former Boston City Hospital (now Boston Medical Center),

establish a women's health practice in Arlington, and serve as medical director at a similar center in Cambridge. But the doubts persisted; medicine was stressful and unsatisfying. In 1998, after paying off her college debt, Hsieh hung up her stethoscope for good. She waited six months to tell her parents: "I can't remember what my dad said because my mom's response was so classic. She literally just dropped the phone."

Hsieh's professional pivot wasn't completely out of the

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blue. Food, she says, was the highlight of her childhood. "It was the way, culturally, that my mom would express how much she cared about our family. She was an amazing cook. Every day was like eating in a Chinese restaurant. There would be four dishes, rice, and soup. She did cook American food, but she was an amazing Chinese cook." She passed none of those skills on to her daughter. "She'd say, 'Your job is to study or go outside.'"

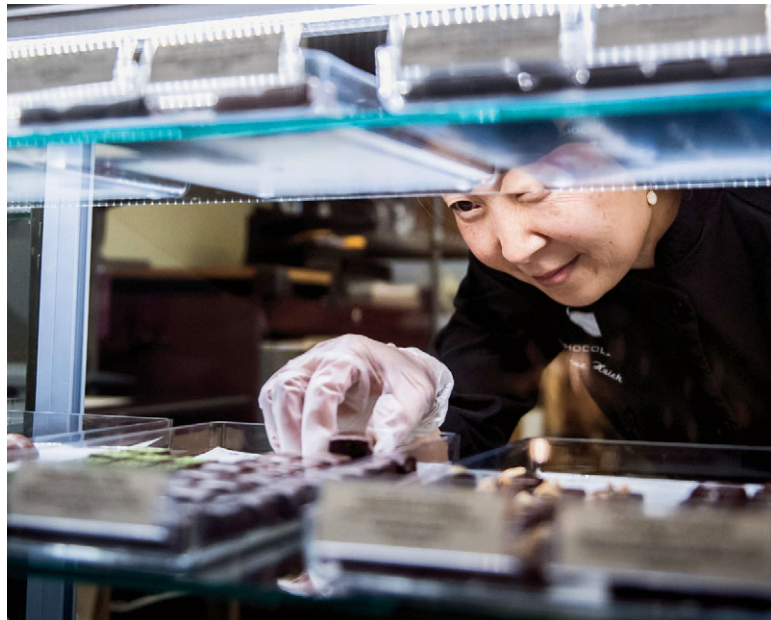
Hsieh taught herself, baking her way through Betty Crocker's cookie recipes as a kid, and cooking in earnest when she became a doctor, to relieve stress. Once she gave up medicine, she had the time to go back to school, training as a professional chef at the Cambridge School of Culinary Arts.

Married with two children, she ran a dessert catering business out of her home, often calling on Sweeney for help. The two

had met in the 1990s, when a mutual friend asked them to make her wedding cake.

In 2000, Hsieh put her business on hold, but she and Sweeney remained friends, getting together for holidays and making occasional wedding cakes. When Sweeney retired from her job in admissions and financial aid at Harvard, Hsieh asked if she wanted to start a business. "I was thinking chocolate at the time," Hsieh says. They spent a year planning and practicing in Hsieh's kitchen, and in 2010 opened EHChocolatier.

Now, their days are filled with tasks like whipping up ganaches (a mixture of chocolate and cream that may be infused with other ingredients, such as herbs and zests), decorating the chocolates with cocoa butter-based designs, hand-dipping peanut butter crunch bars in chocolate (the confections, along with coconutty bars, are among EHChocolatier's



best sellers), or dreaming up new flavors.

Hsieh and Sweeney do most of their recipe testing during the summer, tweaking and revising until they are satisfied. Some of the winners to emerge from their test kitchen: ginger caramels and lemongrass Thai chili bonbons. Not every combination makes the cut. "We tried all different curries," says Hsieh. "Couldn't make it happen."

They will go through about 3,000 pounds of chocolate, 1,000 pounds of sugar, and 300 pounds of butter in a year, and sell their chocolates online (www.ehchocolatier.com), in some specialty shops, and in their factory.

Hsieh says people assume she embarked on her second career because she loves eating chocolate. She loves *working* with chocolate. "Because you're limiting yourself to that ingredient," she says, "it opens itself up to a lot of creativity."

"Honestly, I'm a cookie girl myself. I couldn't work in a bakery. I would just eat everything. This works out very well."