

The Taste of HAPPINESS

SEATTLE
CHOCOLATES CEO
EXPLORES THE
SWEETER SIDE
OF MARKETING



Seattle Chocolates CEO
JEAN THOMPSON

By John Kinmonth

Jean Thompson knows what happiness tastes like.

In fact, her factory in Tukwila produces more than 1 million pounds of it each year.

For Jean, CEO of Seattle Chocolates, happiness starts at the confluence of the Rhine and Neckar rivers in Germany with all-natural, old-world chocolate and then is mixed with distinct Northwest flavors such as Seattle espresso or natural blackberries.

And, while the taste may not have changed much since she took the helm of Seattle Chocolates in 2002, happiness has taken on a whole new look.

"Everybody else in the industry, it seemed to me, was marketing chocolate as a gift that men give to women for Valentine's Day or Christmas," she says. "The women in the ads tend to be these sexy, glamorous women draped across a sofa and waiting for the romantic moment when they were going to be given chocolate—and I thought, that's so not how I eat chocolate.

"Then it came to me, these are men marketing chocolate."

FROM STAY-AT-HOME MOM TO CEO

Jean never planned on running a chocolate company. A former Microsoft marketing executive, Jean took a break from work when her first child, Danny, was born in 1990. She then spent the next 11 years as a stay-at-home mom until her second child, Ellie, started kindergarten. At that point, she toyed with the idea of going back to Microsoft in a part-time role until her husband, Rick Thompson, suggested she pitch in to help market Seattle Chocolates, a struggling business that they had invested in several years prior.

"I thought, sure, I'll just work 20 hours a week. I won't take a salary. I'll just come in and help," she says. Despite questions of Willy Wonkatype aspirations, Jean insists they had acquired the company strictly

as an investment and planned to remain silent owners.

But the business was in a steady downward spiral.

To make matters worse, the CEO quit six weeks after Jean joined, leaving no one at the helm. Although they thought about selling the company, Jean had already fallen in love with the product and the company and decided to try her hand at running the business, which included the considerable logistics of day-to-day manufacturing operations and distribution. Despite the odds, business spiked 57 percent in the first year under her leadership.

"It's a great product, and it was too soon for me to throw in the towel," she says. "I had never run a business, so it was a steep learning curve that, truthfully, I'm still on."

Now six years later, production has tripled, and Seattle Chocolates' products have been featured in countless media outlets, including *O* and *Success* magazines. Besides the Seattle Chocolates and Chick Chocolates brands—which are

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“Women eat chocolate every day. We wanted to give them permission to feel good about eating chocolate,” she says. “Our message was that if you’re going to eat chocolate, spend your calories wisely and eat really good chocolate, and then eat it in moderation.”

Favoring stylish, whimsical packaging over the ubiquitous red, heart-shaped box or earth tones and foil that are common on the chocolate shelf—Jean often looks outside the industry for inspiration.

distributed in more than 8,000 retail locations nationwide, the production facility also makes private-label products such as the popular Macy’s “Frango.”

Despite the growth and success, Jean says the transition from stay-at-home mom to CEO was not easy.

“My whole world was completely changed, nothing was the same,” she says. “I loved it instantly, but it was a stressful year.”

It helped when Niel Campbell, a longtime associate of her husband at Microsoft and also a Bellevue Club member, joined the company in 2003 as president. Niel now handles operations, leaving Jean to focus on marketing, sales and administration. Along with the marketing department, the two are responsible for coming up with new flavors and packaging ideas.

“We love to brainstorm. What could be more fun than dreaming up new ideas for chocolate?” she says.

“We took style cues from cosmetics and fashion,” she says. This past year they unveiled bold new packaging for their best-selling line of truffle bars with the slogan: “What happiness tastes like.”

Although Jean faced a steep learning curve for the manufacturing and distribution side of the business, she found marketing was a matter of looking within.

“I was a newcomer to the industry but was instantly up to speed because I am the consumer,” she says. “When I had to market LAN Manager and COBOL for Microsoft that was a lot harder because I wasn’t familiar with what those people wanted, but I know what a woman likes when it comes to chocolate.”

“I have had a piece of chocolate every day of my life, even if it was Nestlé morsels out of the bag in the cupboard when I was a kid,” she says. “There’s this amazing chemical match between what’s in chocolate and what women crave.”

With all 22 flavors to choose from, Jean doesn’t hesitate when asked her favorite.

“We have a blackberry truffle that’s tart and fruity covered in dark chocolate,” she says. “Year after year, it continues to be my favorite.”

Despite six years of delicious research and development for Seattle Chocolates, Jean has managed to stay fit by adhering to an early morning workout routine at the Club. She is a regular in the 5:30 a.m. spinning class, along with Niel.

With her daily exposure to chocolate, does she ever get tired of tasting happiness?

“It probably took about three years before it stopped screaming across the room for me to eat it,” she says. “Now, I only eat it when I’m hungry. If I get a little lull in my energy level, I will seek out chocolate.”

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REFLECTIONS

FAVORITE BOOK

“Lonesome Dove”—I named my dog Gus after Augustus McCrae.

BEST ADVICE

You should really only do things that you enjoy. If you don’t like it, don’t do it.

FAVORITE FOOD

It’s either chocolate or lobster. In the world of savory, it’s lobster; in the world of dessert, it’s chocolate.

HERO/GREATEST INFLUENCE

My father. He’s 71 and runs three businesses, and he’ll tell you he doesn’t really work.

FIRST JOB

Dairy Queen. There was no cash register, we’d have to add it up in our head. I was also a lifeguard.

FAVORITE ACTIVITY

Spinning—I’m one of the regulars.