

Candy business has met her sweet expectations

[Kristine M. Kierzek](#), Special to the Journal Sentinel Published 10:11 a.m. CT Nov. 3, 2017

Fork. Spoon. Life. Sharon Pavich



(Photo: Submitted photo)

When Sharon Pavich started thinking about a new career she had three requirements. It had to be fun, it had to be in food, and it had to make money.

To her, that meant toffee. She got to work playing with recipes and came up with a pumpkin seed toffee. To test it out on consumers, she started selling at the [Oconomowoc Winter Farmers Market](#). That turned out to be all the incentive she needed.

Four years ago, she took the leap and opened her own store and retail kitchen, Sweet P's Pantry, 169 E. Wisconsin Ave., Oconomowoc. Not only does she make several varieties of toffee in seasonal flavors, but she also makes, in small batches by hand, everything from caramels and chocolates to sponge candy and nut mixes.

Sharing her experience with others who may want to start a food business, she's been teaching at Waukesha County Technical College for the last three years.



Assorted confections from Sweet P's Pantry in Oconomowoc. (Photo: Submitted photo)

Picking a path

Candy was certainly part of my childhood. My mom loved candy. We would make everything from divinity and popcorn balls to fudge. My degree is interior design. I've always been creative. I started a catering business with a friend and had that in Chicago for 15 years. After getting out of that, I decided to think about what I wanted to do for my last career. It's got to be fun, and you have to make money, and it has to be in food.

Creating candy

I really did like toffee as a kid. I came up with pumpkin seed toffee. Being creative I like to twist things around a bit. Pumpkin seed was the first toffee, and then a cherry pecan. We tested those out at the winter farmers market in Oconomowoc. After a couple years of doing that and corporate accounts, we opened the store four years ago.



Sweet P's cashew almond toffee won a red ribbon at State Fair. (Photo: Submitted photo)

A taste for toffee

When we were at the farmers market people would say, do you have any regular toffee? I started making the butter crunch and cashew almond, which are now our two best sellers.

Best bites

Two years ago, (Wisconsin) State Fair instituted a small food business competition. There were something like 10 categories. I entered in 2016 and we won best of category for our rosemary salt and pepper pecans. This year, I entered and won a red ribbon for the cashew almond toffee.

Nut trio

Our rosemary salt and pepper pecans are the second biggest seller, year-round. People were asking if I had other flavors. This is how my product development comes about. I came up with the smoky maple pecans.

This year the spiced orange pecans are going over very well, too. So we now have a trio of nuts. I think I'll stop there for a while because we've covered all the bases.

Being a business owner

My husband will tell you I never step away from food. When I come home, I read food blogs, business food blogs, I search out websites from trade magazines and magazines like Bon Appetit and Food and Wine. I am constantly thinking about food.

Sourcing style

I believe we should support our local economy. Besides, Wisconsin has the best dairy products so why not use them? I can get all kinds of stuff with added sugars and preservatives, but I don't. I believe flavors are better when you use pure ingredients. I think you can taste the difference. Palm oil is so prevalent in chocolate coatings, but we use Belgian couverture and cane sugar. I can't always get everything as pure as I want, but I try to do as much as I can. Most everything is gluten-free, too. There is no need to add flour or other things. Everything is hand-dipped, and we make our toffees in small batches. The only machine we have is a tempering machine.

Memories of mom

Our toffee popcorn makes me think of my mom. We made popcorn every Sunday, but once a month we'd make caramel corn. That was our treat when I was a kid. I have nine siblings and I'm the oldest. It was divine intervention for me to do candy.

Crafting chocolate

We're in Lake Country, so I make sailboats and anchors, a lot of horses. I do mint minnows every summer.

Creativity and classes

I did take a three-day course at the Callebaut chocolate academy in Chicago. I wanted to learn from the experts. I think it is really important to get a base education in anything you do.



Among Sweet P's Pantry's best sellers are toffee and the rosemary salt and pepper pecans. (Photo: Submitted photo)

Creativity and clientele

Our wholesale business has grown. We do some with Sendik's and we also do private-label candy for Sprecher. We make their beer pretzel toffee, beer caramels and root beer caramels for them. The beer pretzel toffee sells really well, and we developed those recipes for them. That's where my creativity comes in.

Necessary equipment

A thermometer is your most important tool. We use an instant-read thermometer, a Thermapen brand. I've had mine for six years and it has not broken. Every few minutes we check temperatures as we cook, rather than clipping it to the side. I tried all sorts of candy thermometers and I learned they don't work as well as my Thermapen, so that's my tool. I still check every batch.

Hazards of the job

We want to have low humidity all the time, so I have dehumidifier going 24/7 and air conditioning year-round. Even the ambient heat from our building will create issues. If I control these things the product tastes better and we get a longer shelf life.

Quality control

There are lots of mistakes in this business, especially when scaling up to larger quantities. Fortunately, I have nine siblings and lots of nieces and nephews to pawn off all my mistakes.

Fork. Spoon. Life. explores the everyday relationship that local notables (within the food community and without) have with food. To suggest future personalities to profile, email nstohs@journalssentinel.com.