

Barking Up The Right Tree

How an Idaho seamstress became a chocolatier.

By onesmartcookie



Cyndi makes about a dozen seasonally rotating flavors of chocolate bark. She uses a rotary cutter to score the bark; then she and her husband, Rob, break it into neat rectangles.



WHEN WORKING WITH CHOCOLATE

Cyndi says it's best to:

- Keep your kitchen cool (55°F to 65°F).
- Use a dehumidifier, or plan ahead to avoid working with chocolate during damp weather.
- Melt chocolate in the microwave in 1- to 2-minute bursts at partial power.
- Use a fan to help cool finished chocolate pieces.



Cyndi Arno was just being her usual crafty self, making peppermint bark as a holiday gift for friends and customers.

She had found the recipe in a magazine. It had white chocolate and peppermint oil, with crushed peppermint candy on top. Cyndi made the recipe her own, adding a bottom layer of dark chocolate for depth.

At Christmastime, she filled a basket with small bags of the sweets and set them out for clients to take as they left her sewing studio. Over and over, they poked their heads back inside, asking, "What was that?"

"That" was the candy that spurred Cyndi to launch a chocolate-bark business, Arno Confection Perfection, in Twin Falls, Idaho. She now sells more than a dozen seasonally changing flavors through regional stores, Nordstrom coffee and espresso bars, and her website (arnoconfectionperfection.com). Her handmade chocolate bark is even stocked in the break room at tech giant Twitter.

"It's exciting when people taste something you made and just light up," she says.

Cyndi, 57, always has had a creative mind. She remembers hovering at age 9 over her mother's shoulder to watch her sew. When she first saw Martha Stewart on television, she couldn't figure out what the big deal was: Isn't everyone like Martha?

She tweaks recipes so often that her kids teasingly refer to dinner as Cyndi's Surprise. Browsing at a hardware store inspires a list of new projects. "I see something, and my mind automatically elaborates on it," she says. "I want to turn it upside down, put a top on it, and see what else I can do with it."

She's had a variety of jobs over the years, working as a furniture upholsterer, a bank auditor, a property manager, and a seamstress. She was a stay-at-home mom with two kids in the late 1980s when she had her first taste of entrepreneurial success. She made hair bows with interchangeable decorations and sold

them at craft shows. A sales rep got her bows into two department stores, and Cyndi later sold the business to a larger company because she couldn't keep up with orders.

After hearing rave reviews about Cyndi's peppermint bark, her husband, Rob, encouraged her to turn it into a business.

At the time, she was working as a seamstress in Hailey, Idaho, a ski resort area where upscale clients asked her to tailor \$500 jeans and make drapes from special-order Italian fabric. She worried that peppermint bark had a short sales season, but her brain got clicking

SO, YOU WANT TO BE A CHOCOLATIER?

Cyndi's advice to newbies:

- Be inquisitive. Read everything you can—even if it's not about your line of work—to glean ideas and information. Ask questions and soak up advice from industry insiders who will share. Inspect product packaging and explore flavors wherever you are—at a wine tasting or in the checkout lane at the grocery store.
- Be positive. Developing bark recipes took tons of trials. "You just have to think: 'There's going to be a silver lining in this. I don't see it right now, but I'm just going to be confident.'"
 - Be devoted. "You're going to work like you never did for anyone else."
 - Be open to feedback. Cyndi made her bark labels herself until a buyer provided frank input, noting that her candy outclassed her packaging.

when she saw hard-candy sticks in an assortment of fruit flavors: What if I go beyond peppermint?

The business idea got a confidence boost in 2009 when Cyndi's bark placed second in a local chocolate competition.

But she and Rob soon began learning the finicky nature of chocolate. Bark is typically made by topping a slab of chocolate with ingredients such as candy, nuts, or fruit. The finished candy, often broken into pieces, mimics the rough texture of tree bark.

While Cyndi's small batches worked just fine, when the couple decided to see how much they could make in one

day, the finished bark crumbled. Cyndi searched the Internet to figure out what went wrong. That's how she learned about tempering chocolate—melting and preparing it at the right temperature to crystallize the cocoa fat, giving the finished chocolate a shiny surface and a snappy texture that holds up over time. Most home cooks don't need to worry about this step because their treats have a short shelf life. But it's crucial for a chocolate business.

Cyndi also looked to other chocolatiers and trade shows to figure out how to manage her persnickety ingredient. She bought professional tempering machines

that melt 10 pounds at a time. She learned to start early on summer days to beat humidity, and she figured out how to ship year-round.

"The chocolate is the boss," she says. "You have to keep the chocolate happy."

Her barks are densely sprinkled with crushed or minced toppings (from fruit to nuts to crunchy candies and sea salt), so you get a taste of them in every bite. Cyndi says it took time to perfect when and how to sprinkle toppings to get them to set right and not fall off when the bark is broken.

Traditional bark has irregular edges, and Cyndi broke hers into pieces by hand

PHOTOS: HATCH AND MAAS COLLECTIVE

at first. "I was going to have arthritis if I kept that up," she says. She found a professional cutting device that looks like a rolling pin with many evenly spaced pizza cutter–esque blades. Her brother, who owns a steel-fabrication company, made her a few more. The tool scores the chocolate into rectangles that are then easily snapped into even pieces.

Cyndi worked from her home kitchen, with the health department's approval, before renting a commercial kitchen from a coffee shop in Hailey. Eventually, high rents in the area led the Arnos to move to Twin Falls, where they could afford their own commercial kitchen.

At first, 90% of her sales were in the three months before Christmas. But business has grown tenfold since then, and Cyndi now makes her living year-round by making bark.

Customers buy candy from her website as personal treats, corporate gifts, and even wedding favors. Cyndi's former sales rep helped get the bark offered for sale in Nordstrom espresso bars. Peppermint remains her most popular flavor, followed by salted caramel-almond crunch.

Cyndi says customer feedback shaped her business. She initially made half-pound packages, expecting people to purchase them as gifts. But customers encouraged her to offer smaller packages so they could avoid eating so much in one sitting. And though she still offers larger gift boxes, the 1.8-ounce bars she created in response are now her top seller.

When a new fan of her lemon bark (white chocolate with a tangy, crunchy coat of crushed lemon candy on top)

suggested a margarita variation with lime candy and sea salt, Cyndi had it available for sale within two weeks.

Two years ago, Cyndi received a call from a buyer who stocks employee break rooms at Twitter and other California tech companies. The caller wondered: Could she ship 180 pounds of bark—tomorrow? It was the largest single order Cyndi had received. She calmly asked if she could send 60 pounds one day and the rest the next, and then promptly got to work.

Twitter now orders 200 pounds a month, and even held a contest for employees to create a flavor. The winner was a dark chocolate bark studded with walnuts, almonds, pistachios, a hint of orange, and a touch of savory spice, called Ihara's Trail.

Cyndi often totes samples in her off hours—she left some behind during a recent winery tour—and she supports a long list of local charities with donated sweets. An Albertsons grocery-store executive who tried it at a fund-raiser now sells her bark in six Idaho stores. (Now that's karma.)

"You throw the chocolate at every opportunity," Cyndi says. "You have to see where it sticks."

Believe it or not, Cyndi hasn't become a chocoholic herself. Tart and tangy is more her style, one reason she created lemon and raspberry-lemonade barks. She limits herself to a single piece of dark chocolate every day, and she has no shortage of volunteer tasters.

"When you have a chocolate business," she says, "you have a lot of friends."

WHEN SHIPPING CHOCOLATE

Label the package as perishable, and choose a two-day shipping method, Cyndi advises. Then check both days' forecast for your location, the shipping route, and the destination, and wrap the package to suit the full temperature range.

- If it's between 30°F and 60°F, put packaged chocolate in a box with packing peanuts.
- If it's below 30°F or between

60°F and 80°F, wrap packaged chocolate in insulated wrap, sealed with tape, before boxing it with packing peanuts.

- If it's above 80°F, tape a frozen gel pack to a piece of cardboard. Put the cardboard against the packaged chocolate. Wrap this bundle with insulated wrap one or two times, and seal with tape. Put the wrapped bundle in a box with packing peanuts.