

Called to THE BAR

Amelia Rope is a determined entrepreneur with a highly creative streak who has built her luxury handmade chocolate business steadily through trial and error and is now poised for expansion. *Kate Patrick* unwraps her luscious package of a story

Today's widespread promotion of real food and natural products has had the effect of encouraging small enterprise and innovation across the food industry. One difficulty for these competing, artisan businesses is, then, in getting themselves noticed. How to achieve that differentiation with your lovingly-crafted product that can make you the Next Big Thing?

In the Roald Dahl-esque world of artisan chocolate-making, Amelia Rope is one very determined, creative, zany risk-taker, who is successfully managing to log bars on the chart of must-have chocolates. Her colourful foil and brown paper-wrapped, authentically-flavoured chocolate bars have been enthusiastically taken up by Selfridges, Liberty, Fenwick, Fortnum's and Whole Foods; no dinner party is cool without her truffles; weddings are marked by her bespoke mini bars and V V Rouleaux ribbon-tied bundles; and her candied flower petals are unique works of art, almost too exquisite to eat.

That's now. But five years ago, it was a very different story. Having studied nutrition and herbal medicine and qualified as an aromatherapist – all useful qualifications for becoming a chocolatier, although she didn't know it at the time – Amelia Rope went to work as manager of a doctor's practice. It was a challenging role, and the practice head suggested she see a business life coach to help manage the diverse characters – a meeting which gave her the self-belief to go in a completely different direction.

So she applied successfully to go on BBC1's Masterchef. "I am not a chef, and never will be," she says, "but I love playing with flavours and food. John Torode came backstage and told me that what I had in my head was unique – I did a few recipes with a twist – and he said I should go and get trained and do something with it." Eric Treille, owner of the legendary London bookstore Books for Cooks, advised her to take the five-day Bonbons du Chocolat course run by Valrhona. This total immersion was mesmerising: discovering the symbiosis between chocolate and high quality coffee and fine wine; the ways cocoa trees are cultivated; the different stages in producing the liquor from the bean; the relevance of high quality beans to the eventual taste. It reinforced what she already felt about food



– the importance of high quality ingredients, taste, purity, the odd hint of luxury.

A second attempt at Masterchef saw her win the 'restaurant round' with her risotto, before being despatched from the competition via a note handwritten on pink Smythson card in brown ink (the inspiration for her corporate colours today). This led, however, to a meeting with a top food editor, to which she took some handmade chocolate truffles. "They were bowled over and I was put on The Market Kitchen with Tana Ramsay, specifically to coat and dip truffles." Inspired by this experience, she set to work making crystallised flora. "I will have a vision and then I try to make it work. I could just see a rose petal with its lip dipped in chocolate and decorated with gold leaf. So I bought some roses and began to teach myself how to crystallise them. Believe me, if I had been trained as a patisserie chef, I would never have embarked on it..."

Rope drove around London dropping off crystallised flowers at offices of national newspapers and magazines. The response, she says, was phenomenal. "They started by being featured in The Telegraph's Stella magazine, and from there snowballed into TV and radio. I had orders coming in, no kitchen, no cash, no business experience, no food experience..."

And so Amelia Rope Chocolate was born.

Scalability of the crystallised flora was a problem to start with, and packaging was another challenge; so she embarked on some special orders, starting with Patrick Reeves, founder of sofa.com, who commissioned her to make 1,000 chocolate bars to send to his customers. Pale Edition 01, the basic milk bar, was introduced in February 2010 – and, for good measure, Rope dropped some off with Ewan Venters, head of Selfridges' Food Hall. "I was amazed to get a call to say they were right for Selfridges and asking me to do an exclusive later in the year."

Drawing on her aromatherapy past, Rope then conjured her first flavoured bars. "I realised I could have as much fun with chocolate bars as I could with crystallised flora, and they were far easier to get out to the market."

Aided and mentored by family, business friends and associates (who raised £7,000 when the banks turned her down), Rope set about expanding her collection of flavoured

chocolate bars, working from a converted chocolate kitchen in Borough, south-east London. Four moves and considerable expansion later, she still does all the recipes, sourcing the best ingredients she can find, from 95% UK suppliers: hazelnut, lime or lemon with sea salt; coffee bean – using real, crisp coffee beans; smoked cashew; ginger; mandarin; rose, and so forth. "If my name is on the product it has to be totally me. I am very selfish with the flavours, as they are purely what I want to eat. Even my friends don't know the new flavours I am working on."

The bars are hand-foiled, distinctively hand outered (with brown wrapping) and signed.

Rope acknowledges that it is important to build a business selling to small, independent delis and food shops at first. "But larger stores give credibility to your product and inspire trust. I was lucky in that the product I designed tapped into the premium market represented by Selfridges. But the product has to sell itself. If it isn't right, it won't work. I also sell beyond food stores. If there is a saturated market (chocolate is definitely one), you need to go where others are not necessarily going."

Rope has consistently reinvested back in the business, offering support to retailers and plenty of samplings to meet the customers direct. "I wanted to make sure I generated repeat sales, as to me that is the test of whether your product can really get 'out there'. Now the business has grown significantly and so I can deliver the supply and focus on growing in both the UK and export."

Having won four Academy of Chocolate Awards in 2011 (a scheme launched by Michel Roux in 2005 in London to promote awareness of fine chocolate amongst consumers), Rope is now in talks with keen investors to move the business forward, globally. Her vision is to open small boutiques in the major fashion cities, to be the most luxurious, sought-after chocolate brand in the world, to build an education foundation to promote links with cocoa-producing countries and to raise awareness of the cost of producing pure, top quality chocolate. "The future of this business is like me, really," she says. "Full of surprises, earthy and flirty."

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