

Picture: Steve Cox

“It’s much more difficult for a woman to find time to aim for the top. I’m a wife, mother and run my own business”



CONSIDERING the recent brouhaha about baking and the rise and rise of the celebrity confectioner, you’d think we would be familiar with the name Ruth Hinks by now. The Scottish-based first female UK World Chocolate Master, who will be the first woman ever to represent the UK in the World Chocolate Masters in Paris next year, has no interest in joining the mainstream.

“The stuff they were making on the Great British Bake-Off is so out of date; I was making fraiser cakes back in the 1990s,” sniffs the Peebles-based patissiere. “It’s time it updated its repertoire to embrace more cutting-edge techniques. Nobody melts their chocolate in a bain-marie any more. Patisserie has moved on, but the Great British Bake-Off has not.”

The 40-year-old owner of the Cocoa Black shop, cafe and pastry school, who was born in South Africa and brought up in Australia, has made it her business to stay one step ahead of the game. After training at the Cocoa Barry chocolate schools in Paris and Zurich and working with the legendary Michelin-starred chef Albert Roux, she joined the Australian Culinary Team and went on to be named Australian Pastry Chef of the Year, winning gold twice at the Culinary Olympics in Germany. She’s since held various head pastry chef positions at prestigious five-star hotels.

In 2008, when at the Sheraton in Edinburgh, she left the hotel industry for good to launch her own business with the backing of Scottish Enterprise and Scottish Borders Council and to continue her upward trajectory in competitive confectionery, where she has proved herself a serious contender.

Last year she was named UK Confectioner of the Year and Cocoa Black chocolates were voted the UK’s best chocolates in the 2011 UK Chocolate Masters. “The judge said my pink peppercorn ganache was the best chocolate he’d ever tasted,” she beams.

She sells thousands of her fresh hand-made chocolates every week as well as exquisite French-influenced cakes, tarts, friands, truffles, mousses, sponges and gateaux. She has just perfected an exquisite frangella caramel with crunchy hazelnut for her Christmas chocolate collection, which also includes her award-winning Californian muscat with fruit and nuts. She uses



RUTH HINKS
Master chocolatier

INTERVIEWED BY
CATE DEVINE

sustainably sourced cocoa from the professionals’ brand Barry Callebaut.

Not bad for the daughter of a dentist who warned her off eating sweets as a child, and who admits to a weakness for Cadbury’s Minty Bubbles and Toblerone.

“Compared to Milk Tray, where you can eat a whole layer in one go, you can only eat two or three of my chocolates at a time, because of the quality of the chocolate. It’s not as sweet because there are fewer additives,” she says.

Chocolate must be properly tempered for making premier hand-made sweets, in order to avoid it turning out dull rather than shiny, and developing a white bloom caused by an inedible fat in the cocoa butter. Properly

tempered chocolate is shiny looking, smooth-tasting and gives a satisfying snap when broken.

“Cocoa crystals are aligned by heating and cooling the chocolate; it’s quite scientific,” explains Hinks, who failed home economics at school but excelled in maths, accountancy and science. “To stabilise the crystals, dark chocolate should be heated to between 40-45 degrees, milk chocolate to between 30-32 degrees and white to between 20-30 degrees. Then it’s cooled and reheated. You can tell when it’s tempered because it’s very shiny.”

Her daily schedule is gruelling enough to fell the strongest. She’s at work by 5am six days a week, leaving her two young children – Aiden, five, and Delphine, four – with their Peebles-born father David, a former management consultant with KPMG who is now business manager of Cocoa Black.

“The kids ring me when they wake up then I shoot home to make them breakfast,” she says. “I’m with them again by 5pm, so David can work into the night. Then the kids won’t let me out of their sight. They plead with me, ‘Mummy, please don’t go to work while I’m in the bath!’ and they’re always watching I don’t slink out.”

“I thrive on being busy, in fact Cocoa Black was opened just a few months after Aiden was born, and a few months before Delphine arrived. But having said that I’m forever feeling mum-guilt.”

David’s widowed father John now lives with the family, following the death of David’s sister Analise earlier this year. “We came back to Peebles after David’s mother

died, to help John look after Analise,” explains Hinks. “I have absolutely no regrets because Peebles is a beautiful place and I am with the people I love. I was born in East London, South Africa, so I’ve always been a small-town girl at heart.”

Given her family and business commitments, she is understandably anxious about how she is going to fit in the necessary preparation for the World Chocolate Masters (WCM) final at the Salon du Chocolat in Paris next October.

She has just embarked on a mandatory year-long training course under top pastry chefs Marcus Boha of Harrods and previous WCM winner Mark Tilling, and must commit to working with them 25 hours a week in order to arm herself for the greatest challenge of her professional life so far. She expects to be sent to Belgium and Paris as part of her training, and to manage three complete run-throughs before the actual two-day competition, infamous for its demands on competitors’ concentration, nerve and expertise.

Hinks will be up against 19 top male and female chocolatiers from all over the world including Japan, Australia, the US, the Netherlands, Belgium and Denmark. They must produce a range of eye-catching showpieces with strong aesthetic appeal, starting on day one with a two-metre high showpiece sculpture, which must be self-supporting; 50 moulded and 50 dipped chocolates; two gateaux; eight plated desserts, and a creation made from a

mystery box of ingredients (although everything has to be made from chocolate). All creations must reflect the theme of the Architecture of Taste, and Hinks is consulting two architect friends in Edinburgh on how buildings are constructed. The UK judge is likely to be James “Jocky” Petrie, the head pastry chef at Heston Blumenthal’s Fat Duck restaurant in Bray, Berkshire.

At the moment Hinks is experimenting with yuzu, a Japanese citrus fruit, which she says is “new and funky”, and her current favourite chocolate for her shells is a dark and fruity 75% Tanzanian.

When she took part in the Gourmet Abu Dhabi 2011, the bi-annual gastronomic extravaganza, she made parsnip and chocolate tart, morello cherry bavoires with chocolate jaconde, chocolate glaze and kirsch sauce, and hosted high-profile patisserie masterclasses.

She was in the rarefied company of top international female pastry chefs such as Janice Wong, chef-owner of 2am: Dessertbar, the renowned high-tech gastro bar in Singapore; and Loretta Fanella, former pastry chef at El Bulli, the Catalan restaurant voted best in the world for many years.

She thrives on the adrenaline rush of performing at the top level. “I’m not competing, I’m just pushing out my own boundaries,” she insists. “I enjoy the experience because you learn so much from looking at what others are doing. There is nothing like travelling to expand your culinary horizons.”

Why does she think it has taken so long for the UK to finally find a woman good enough to represent it at the WCM?

“I think men and women have the same techniques, though if anything women are more suited to this, because we have more finesse,” she says.

“But it’s much more difficult for a woman to find the time to aim for the top. I’m a wife and mother and I also run my own business. I don’t think men have the same pressures.”

“It would be nice to be the first woman to win the World Chocolate Masters for the UK. I like to think I’d inspire more women to try for greatness. I have quite a few unmarried female friends who don’t have children, and they are now saying that if I can do it, then so can they.”

LIFE AND LOVES

Career high: Winning the UK World Chocolate Master and the UK Confectioner of the Year titles in the same year.

Career low: Having to give up on the idea of opening a chocolate business in Tanzania because of red tape.

Favourite film: Chocolat.

Last book read: Chocolat To Savour by my dear friend Kirsten

Tibballs. One of the best chocolate books available.

Best trait: Being busy. Challenge makes life an exciting journey.

Worst trait: I am very patient and tolerant – up to a point. Then I take strong action.

Best advice received: Always aim to work with the best in the business – and be prepared to travel the world to achieve this.

Biggest influence: The captain (Gary Farrell) on the Australian Culinary Olympics team. He made me proud to be a pastry chef.

Favourite meal: I tend to only eat in good restaurants and normally have a tasting menu.

Favourite holiday destination: I adore Annecy near Geneva.

Favourite music: Anything that’s not The Wiggles.



Ideal dinner guests: James Petrie (head pastry chef at The Fat Duck), Chris Evans, Tom Kitchin, David Attenborough, David Walliams and Helen Mirren, above.

SUBSCRIBE NOW AND SAVE UP TO £130 A YEAR



Package	£ Saving on cover price	% Saving on cover price	Loyalty card*	Online Package/ App**
7 day subscription (Mon-Sun)	£130	30%	✓	✓
6 day subscription (Mon-Sat)	£97.76	27%	✓	✓
Weekend subscription (Sat & Sun)	£29.12	20%	✗	✗
Sunday subscription (Sunday Herald)	£13.52	20%	✗	✗

* Save at a huge range of shops and online retailers
** Unlimited access to heraldscotland.com and The Herald and Sunday Herald app.

SPECIAL OFFER
CLOSES FRIDAY NOVEMBER 30 2012

Over 4,500 readers now benefiting. TAKE ADVANTAGE NOW CALL US ON 0141 302 7300 Monday-Friday 9am-5pm