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Chocolatier Kate Shaffer



At first blush, any connection between Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* and Kate Shaffer's fabulous, handcrafted chocolates is unclear. Yet in a serendipitous way, it was Child's book that launched Shaffer on the culinary quest that would culminate in Black Dinah Chocolatiers, the charming Maine chocolate company and café founded by Shaffer and her husband and business partner Steve in the shadow of Black Dinah mountain. "I've always loved the idea of cooking," Shaffer says. "My mom, bless her heart, wasn't a very inspired cook, but fortunately I was able to spend a lot of time

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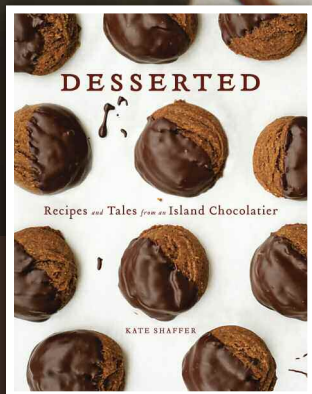
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with my aunt, a home-economics major who loved being in the kitchen, and her husband, an Italian who loved to eat.” These happy culinary experiences with her aunt and uncle soon convinced Shaffer that she could assume the cooking duties in her own home, so at age 10, she checked out Child’s cookbook from the local library and got to work. “My first meal was *coq au vin*, and it was a disaster,” Shaffer says with a chuckle. “But I loved the process of preparing the dish. I was hooked.”

Fast forward to early 2005. Shaffer found herself living on the remote, sparsely populated Isle au Haut, a few miles off Maine’s rocky coast and a lifetime away from the sunny, temperate climes of her California childhood. Island life was very quiet and consisted of short days and long hours indoors. Finding herself alone one night (husband Steve was spending weekdays working on the mainland) and facing down a bleak winter evening, Shaffer turned to the kitchen for succor. Rummaging around for ideas, she came across a recipe for chocolate truffles that she had been eager to try for some time. A few hours later she had a beautiful little pile of truffles before her and a burgeoning idea. Once again, Shaffer was hooked.

In the ensuing months, chocolate appeared increasingly in Shaffer’s cooking repertoire, and eventually she and Steve decided to go into the chocolate business. While that decision was intensely personal, the Shaffers realized that the chocolate itself must have a more broad-based appeal if the business were to have any chance at success. Also, bacon-flavored chocolate, for instance, was not going to fly. “Isle au Haut is very remote and quite tiny,” Shaffer notes. “There are only about 40 residents and almost everyone is supported by the fisheries in some way. The idea of making high-end chocolate here was a bit of an anomaly.” The couple knew they needed a product that was portable and shippable, but also one that would appeal to a variety of palates. “We don’t operate in a vacuum—we wanted a sense of adventure in our chocolate and in the companion café we planned to open, but we couldn’t get too weird,” she says.

In typical island fashion, Shaffer and her husband wasted no time in getting the community involved. They invited a mix of fellow islanders to their home for a chocolate tasting one night and paid close attention to the feedback they received. “It was an amazing experience, and I learned a lot, both about chocolate and about appealing to people’s palates,” Shaffer recalls. They came away from the evening with a winning chocolate for their truffles and a better understanding of the impact that the island’s micro culture would have on their products. “We’ve had a lot of recipes come from those long winter nights of testing as well as from other encounters with friends and neighbors,” Shaffer says. For example, a couple of years ago one of the island’s larger homes was set ablaze by a lightning strike. The whole island turned out to fight the fire, and by morning, everyone was starving. “I headed to the café, pulled everything I had out of the refrigerator and started making biscuits. People loved them! I dubbed them ‘Fire Brigade Biscuits,’ and they’re *still* served at the café every day.”



Previous page: The rugged coast of Isle au Haut, a tiny island off Maine's coast and the home of Kate Shaffer, creator of the mouthwatering Black Dinah Chocolates. | This page: A fresh batch of Black Dinah truffles, the delectable dessert that set Shaffer on the path to success. A tempting truffle recipe was the first thing that Shaffer attempted when she began experimenting with chocolate. | Photography: © 2011, Stacey Cramp, from *Desserted: Recipes and Tales from an Island Chocolatier*, Down East Books.

In her new book, *Desserted: Recipes and Tales from an Island Chocolatier*, Shaffer shares many more wonderful stories about the impetus for her various creations. She chronicles her life on the island and the development of the business in a charming, conversational tone that reveals her other love: writing. “My first dream was to be a writer,” Shaffer says. “I was an English lit major in college, and yes, I have an unfinished manuscript for a novel tucked away in a desk drawer,” she says. Early in her career, Shaffer worked as a freelance writer, but the move to Isle au Haut pulled her away from composing and into cooking. The birth of Black Dinah Chocolatiers brought her two loves together. “When I started working in the kitchen with chocolate, everything just fell into place,” Shaffer recounts with a hint of wonder in her voice. “Steve and I bootstrapped the business,” she explains. “We did all of the PR and marketing ourselves, from the website to the press releases, so I had ample opportunity to draw on my writing skills. And then when Down East Books approached me about doing a journal cookbook, I thought, ‘Wow! This is amazing!’”

Though Shaffer clearly delights in the random aspects of the creative process, her passion for chocolate also has scientific underpinnings. “I was not a science type growing up, but when I started working with chocolate, I was fascinated by the process and the need to figure things out. Chocolate really challenges me. I screwed things up a lot in the beginning. I found many of the books on chocolate too complicated to be helpful, so I set out on a quest to make things simpler through creative understanding.” Working out of her home, she made lots of mistakes and learned a great deal. “I got very intimate with cocoa butter,” she says. There is a very specific, clear science behind chocolate, and you have to control crystallization to succeed. “I had to make analogies that I could understand in order to work with chocolate. That’s what hooked me initially—I just really didn’t understand the process.” After hours of experimentation, however, Shaffer has mastered her medium. “Now I teach workshops and make chocolate very accessible,” she says proudly. “At this point, I can teach a 10-year-old to temper chocolate.”

When asked what she imagines she might be doing had she not stumbled onto chocolate on that dark winter night nearly a decade ago, Shaffer laughs softly, then pauses. “I don’t know,” she says. “It’s a really good question. Sometimes something just pops into your head, and you know it’s right. For me, it was chocolate. I’ve always believed that you eventually get to where you want to be, even though the path is not always clear. I just feel like everything I’ve done in life has led up to this end result—Black Dinah. It’s strange, because everything felt so right at the time, but it all prepared me for this. It makes me wonder what Black Dinah is preparing me for!”

INSPIRED TO BAKE? Turn to page 42 for Shaffer’s delectable recipe for Orange-Scented Chocolate-Espresso Cinnamon Buns.



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Orange-Scented Chocolate-Espresso Cinnamon Buns

When I ran out of milk during a morning bake several years ago, I was forced to grab desperately for a substitution to make these buns. The carton of orange juice in the refrigerator seemed the only likely candidate at the time. And from that, this recipe evolved. *Makes 8*

For the filling:

3/4 cup dark brown sugar
1/4 cup granulated sugar
2 teaspoons cinnamon
1/8 teaspoon ground cloves
1/8 teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
1 cup chopped bittersweet chocolate

For the dough:

2 1/2 cups flour
1 1/4 teaspoons baking powder
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 cup orange juice
2 tablespoons granulated sugar
1/2 cup buttermilk
6 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
1 tablespoon instant espresso powder

For the icing:

3 ounces cream cheese
1/4 cup orange juice concentrate, thawed
Finely grated zest of one orange
2 tablespoons superfine sugar

1. Heat the oven to 425 degrees. Cut a large piece of parchment paper into roughly 8, 4"x4" squares. Spray an 8-cup muffin tin lightly with cooking oil (if you do not have an 8-cup muffin tin, just use a 12-cup one).
2. In a medium-size bowl, make the filling. Stir together the brown sugar, the 1/4 cup sugar, cinnamon, cloves, and salt. Stir in 2 tablespoons of the melted butter, until the mixture feels a little damp. Mix in the chocolate.
3. To make the dough, in a large bowl, whisk together the flour, baking powder, baking soda, salt, and sugar.
4. In a large glass measuring cup, stir together the buttermilk, orange juice, melted butter, and espresso powder.
5. Pour this mixture into the flour mixture and stir until a shaggy dough forms. Don't overmix. Turn out onto a lightly floured board and pat into a rectangle, about 1/2 inch thick, with the long sides facing you.

6. Spread the filling mixture onto the entire surface of your rectangle and pat it down lightly. Scatter the chopped chocolate over the filling.
7. Working from the side closest to you, roll up the dough jelly-roll fashion. Cut this log into 8 discs.
8. Place a 4"x4" square of parchment paper on top of one of the cavities of your muffin tin, and then place a disc of dough, cut side up, onto the square and gently push the roll, paper and all, into the muffin cavity. Repeat this step with each roll.
9. Bake for 20 to 25 minutes. Remove the buns from the oven and allow them to cool slightly.
10. While the buns are baking, whip the cream cheese, orange juice concentrate, orange zest, and superfine sugar in a food processor, until the mixture is completely smooth. Frost the buns with thick blobs of icing and serve warm. ■

FOR A LIST OF SOURCES, SEE PAGE 119

Recipe: © 2011, Kate Shaffer, from *Desserted: Recipes and Tales from an Island Chocolatier*, Down East Books.