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Chapel Hill Chocolate Shop Special Treats Helps People with Disabilities One Truffle at a Time

by Layla Khoury-Hanold
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comment



Photo by Caitlin Penna

Whiskey Crackers at Special Treats

It's not unusual for chocolate shops to be intimate. Diminutive treats like bonbons and truffles don't take up much room, and unless a

Special Treats
1129 Weaver Dairy Road,
Chapel Hill

shop has a production kitchen on site, there's no need for a sweeping space. So when Dan Friedman, a former real estate investment manager, noticed that the smallest space in Chapel Hill's Timberlyne Shopping Center was vacant, he saw it as the perfect place to start a business with his adult son, Alex.

919-883-2151

www.specialtreatsnc.com

Alex has hyperlexia, an autism-related syndrome characterized by an unusually high reading ability, offset by deficits in verbal communication. As is the case for many people with disabilities, finding a job can be difficult. With Special Treats, which opened in August 2017, Friedman envisioned a way to semi-retire, spend more time with Alex, and provide a steady and fulfilling job for him and others with disabilities. The shop may be small, but it's got the biggest heart around.

Special Treats' products are sourced from nonprofits that employ people with disabilities. Main supplier Chocolate Spectrum is run by a professional chocolatier in Florida who is also a speech and language therapist and an autism expert. Her disabled employees receive training and help turn out the gourmet truffles that line Special Treats' display case, including flavors like dulce de leche, coconut lime, and blueberry lemon. Pennsylvania's Highland Chocolates primarily employs with people with Down Syndrome and produces treats like almond bark, pretzel bark, and the uber-popular Tree Stumps, chocolate-covered mini pretzels sandwiching caramel and peanut butter.



Photo by Caitlin Penna

Dan Friedman

Recently, cannabidiol chocolates from Nutty Steph's, a Vermont company that employs people with disabilities, have been flying off the shelves. The dark chocolates are made with a non-psychoactive compound of the cannabis plant (read: these will not get you high) and are available in thirteen-milligram heart-shaped chocolates and ninety-milligram bars. In addition to chocolate, Friedman sells candles and soaps from Chapel Hill's Extraordinary Ventures, where Alex used to work.

Alex moved to Florida with his mother a few months after the shop's opening, but Special Treats continues to be a sought-after place for people with disabilities to work.



"We've always had plenty of people who want to work here," Friedman says. "The unemployment rate for people with disabilities is very high. There are always people with autism, Down Syndrome, and physical disabilities looking for work, typically part time. Which works well for the store, too."

Special Treats is also earning a reputation as a boutique chocolate shop (particularly for last-minute Valentine's Day gifts) among shoppers who like its mission. But they kept asking if any of the confections were made locally. Until recently, the answer was no.

"Many of our customers like the idea of products made locally by people with disabilities. It adds another layer or favorable quality to the product," Friedman says.

Even without a place to make product, and without a working knowledge of chocolate-making, Friedman's entrepreneurial spirit and dedication fueled him to persevere. During his research, he discovered Piedmont Food and Agriculture Processing Center, a Hillsborough-based nonprofit that is an incubator for new food businesses. In addition to having a commercial kitchen, including a chocolate-tempering machine, PFAP provided vital resources for training, ingredient-sourcing, safety and health requirements, and packaging and design.

Friedman's first creations were called Whiskey Crackers: round, buttery crackers dipped in semi-sweet chocolate and topped with Tennessee-whiskey-infused pecan chips. It took months of recipe testing and informal taste-testing—Friedman plays in two local bands, and his bandmates were eager testers—to strike the perfect balance between sweet and savory, creamy and crunchy. It also took time for Friedman and his kitchen manager, Paul Parsons, a legally disabled man with previous restaurant experience, to figure out scaling production—finding the right blade for chipping the pecans without pulverizing them and mastering the chocolate tempering machine. The duo works at PFAP's

kitchen from ten p.m. to four a.m. Thankfully, Parsons also makes a mean cup of coffee.

Another hurdle was making sure the Whiskey Crackers were alcohol-free. Though the whiskey imparts a subtle flavor, all the booze is cooked off. To ensure that the treats were certified alcohol-free, a requirement for labeling, Friedman worked with N.C. State's Food Lab to conduct an analysis.

"One of my most exciting days as a chocolate maker was when an inspector from the Department of Agriculture watched us make a batch of Whiskey Crackers, and he signed off," Friedman says. "It meant I could sell Whiskey Crackers to the public. I think we have a hit on our hands."

Saxapahaw General Store has already placed an order; Friedman is in discussions to place them in other area specialty shops. He hopes his product will be on Southern Season's shelves by the fall.

In addition to Whiskey Crackers, Friedman makes flavored popcorn in combinations like dark chocolate espresso and maple bacon chipotle. He's also developing a chocolate coffee bark using Gabi's Grounds coffee beans, a special blend made by local roaster Larry's Coffee for Gabi Angelini, a young woman with Down Syndrome who is selling it to raise funds to open a Raleigh coffee shop that will employ others with disabilities. (Friedman also sells bags of Gabi's Grounds coffee in his shop.)

On what it means to him to be able to help other people with disabilities, both through his shop and by supporting likeminded businesses, Friedman says, "It's been one of those things when you do something to help other people in the community, and it ends up helping you."

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