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## Chocolate Lady's passion becomes decadent venture

**By Sonia Krishnan**

*Seattle Times Eastside bureau*

Put down that candy bar you swiped from the kids' Halloween stash.

You think that's real chocolate? Please. Real chocolate isn't supposed to be gobbled by the handful with greedy abandon. It should be savored. Relished. Experienced.

Just ask Suzy Cassidy.

The North Bend woman will warn you not to get her started on the subject. Chocolate is her obsession, her love and her work. Cassidy samples chocolates for a living.

Locally, she has earned the nickname "Chocolate Lady." Online, she's the founder of a niche business, [chocolate2die4.com](http://chocolate2die4.com), making chocolate gift baskets.

Now, through invitation-only tasting parties, she's setting out to spread the guilt-free message that dark chocolate is loaded with antioxidants and actually is *good* for you.

"I'm a chocoholic," admits Cassidy, 41. "I used to be in the closet about it. But now that I'm out, I can't get enough."



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In the past year, Suzy Cassidy has turned her life — and her North Bend home — upside down to devote herself to the confection. Truffles, cookies, candles, Christmas decorations, all lie scattered in what once was her living room.



At her home in North Bend, Suzy Cassidy gets samples on a regular basis from chocolate vendors pitching their wares. She tastes them all and decides which ones she'll sell online.

Like wine lovers who have turned their yen for cabernet into a passionate hobby and coffee drinkers who can discern an arabica from a robusta, Americans such as Cassidy are turning chocolate into the next "it" food. They're buying gourmet truffles, throwing tasting parties and even slathering their faces in chocolate at spas during skin-pampering facials.

"There's definitely been a lot of buzz," said Michael Allured, publisher of *Manufacturing Confectioner*, a Wisconsin-based trade magazine about the chocolate industry. "Part of it has to do with the decadence factor."

Indeed, some say the high-end chocolate fad is a reflection of America's growing hunger for affordable luxury items, from handbags to 800-thread-count sheets.

"Chocolate is becoming, in many ways, like wine and micro-brewed beer," said Van Billington, executive director of Retail Confectioners International. "People seem to have more disposable income for fine-food products."

Retailers are responding. Mars Inc. opened a line of gourmet shops this year called "ethel's chocolate lounge," where customers can eat chocolate and chat. This year, Hershey Co. bought Scharffen Berger, a Berkeley, Calif., company specializing in top-notch dark chocolates, to gain a foothold in the gourmet market.

At her home in North Bend, Cassidy gets samples on a regular basis from chocolate vendors pitching their wares. She tastes them all, winnows the good from the bad, and decides which ones she'll sell online.

"The journey of finding good chocolate is a whole euphoric experience," she said.

For someone who lives and breathes for this decadence, Cassidy's 5-foot frame weighs in at a lithe 100 pounds. Her secret? Better to give in to one piece of the finest than a whole box of Whitman's.

"I eat at least a truffle a day," she said. "A truffle a day keeps the doctor away."

The chocolates that have stolen her heart are a far cry from the convenience-store Twix bar. Delicately balanced in flavor as a fine wine, this stuff runs \$2 and up per piece and is pure enough to give the



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Suzy Cassidy, holding a gift basket she made called "Home is where the chocolate is," says her obsession started two years ago.

indulger a sweet buzz, she said.

"Halloween candy is kids' chocolate," she said. "You get all the junk but none of the flavor."

"Now *real* chocolate," she said, "is something to be experienced. I tell people not to chew it. Let it melt in your mouth. Get that chocolate high."

Cassidy's obsession started two years ago when she couldn't figure out what to get her sister for Christmas. She knew her sister's one weakness — chocolate — and decided she couldn't go wrong, she said.

She found chocolate candles, chocolate lip gloss, even chocolate suntan lotion. Her curiosity was piqued.

"I thought, 'Wow, everyone loves chocolate,' " she said. "I kind of went gangbusters."

Cassidy read armloads of books, toured chocolate factories and discovered the intricate processing required to make chocolate. She learned that the way cocoa beans dry in the sun affects their flavor, and even fine-tuned her ear to "hear" the difference between good and bad chocolate.

"With good chocolate, there's a clean, crisp snap when you bite into it," she said. "With Reese's, you'll get kind of a thud."

In the past year, Cassidy has turned her life — and her home — upside down to devote herself to the confection. Truffles, cookies, candles, Christmas decorations, all lie scattered in what once was her living room. Cassidy had to clear a path to the piano so her daughter — one of her three children — could practice, she said.

In that living room, Cassidy confessed something about her past: She used to chow down on M&Ms, Hershey's, Milk Duds.

"Sometimes," she said in a hushed voice, "I still have a weakness for Snickers bars."

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