

Chocolate Wonderland

Baum's is a sweet West Richland institution

By Gail Clark

The silky, warm aroma of chocolate welcomes you, awakening the taste buds as you enter Baum's House of Chocolates in West Richland.

Cases are filled with selections of handcrafted chocolates to please the chocolate-lover's palette and tease even the most petulant child into wild-eyed, awed silence upon entering this chocolate wonderland. Select a delectable truffle or a box filled with many flavors as a special gift for yourself or a friend.

Favorite goodies include the Old English toffee, bear paws, caramels and truffles. Sugar-free candy is available for those on a sugar-restricted diet.

Kathy Baumgartner opened Baum's in 1981.

"Since I was in my 20s, I had dreams

of owning a candy shop," says Kathy. "There I was in my 40s and I decided there was no better time than now to do what I really wanted. I could not afford to hire employees in those early years, as I was learning the business. I remember days when I was at the stove stirring caramel. I stirred each batch by hand and could not leave it to wait on customers, so I would ask one customer to stir while I waited on another. Everyone was so nice about helping me."

Later, Kathy was able to buy equipment to make those jobs easier. She attended chocolate seminars when she could get away, and was invited to Guittard's Chocolate University in



Rick and Gayle Vance, owners of Baum's House of Chocolates since 2008.

Belgium.

"That was where I learned wonderful new techniques using different types of chocolate," she says. "I used some of what I learned in my shop, but I mostly kept to my own recipes and customer favorites."

Kathy says Baum's new owners, Rick and Gayle Vance, are still using most of those recipes.

Kathy met Rick when she ordered a sign from his sign company.

"I was intrigued by the candy business then, but Gayle and I were in the real estate business at the time," Rick says. "In 2008, I saw the listing that Baum's was for sale. Kathy had decided to sell the store and retire, and I was ready to take over. I had never really cooked anything, but Kathy patiently worked with me to first learn how to cook candy and then how to make truffles."

Rick quickly grasped the cooking fundamentals, and can now be found in the store's kitchen stirring up fresh batches of caramel, fondant and nougat each day.

Gayle has found her niche by creating gift baskets.

"We've added unique gift items in the store as well as gourmet foods produced in the Northwest, including mustard,



Gayle and her daughter, store manager Kristin Gustin, cover marshmallows with buttery homemade caramel. A favorite with children, each marshmallow is decorated for the season.



meat rubs, specialty coffee and even healthy dog treats,” Gayle says. “I enjoy putting together baskets for special occasions or with someone’s favorite theme.”

Kathy enjoys retirement and fondly remembers all of the people who helped her build the business as the place to buy chocolate in the Tri-Cities.

Rick and Gayle carry on the tradition of Baum’s House of Chocolates. The new owners work diligently to stay faithful to Kathy’s recipes as they continue to learn the business of ordering supplies, becoming acquainted with new vendors and anticipating holiday needs.

“Yes, Christmas is the busiest season, but it’s spread out over several weeks,” says Gayle. “Valentine’s Day, a close second, is a flurry of activity over about four days.”

Rick and Gayle’s daughter, Kristin Gustin, was living in Seattle when her parents bought the candy store. She took vacations from her job to help them during the holidays, especially Valentine’s Day.

“I liked the customers and the work



Above, during her first visit to Baum’s, Fran Butler, left, discusses the selection with Kristin.

Left, Kristin and longtime employee Andrew Krejci attend to bear paws as they are cut, enrobed in chocolate and travel along the conveyor belt through the cooling tunnel.

so much that I decided to move my family to the Tri-Cities and become the store manager,” Kristin says. “I enjoy cooking as well as ordering and selecting unique products for the store’s gift line.”

Fortunately, Andrew Krejci, Kathy’s first full-time employee, continued working for Baum’s. His 22 years of experience with the candy shop have helped smooth the candy-making path.

Andrew is a real chocolate fan. Asked which is his favorite, he replies, “Whatever is within reach.”

He often cuts bear paws before they are covered with chocolate. The bear paws are coated with chocolate on the bottom side, then it is on to the chocolate curtain to coat or enrobe them before they go through the 17-foot cooling tunnel. As finished bear paws come out of the tunnel, they are quickly packed in boxes. Getting a little behind can be a problem, so there is an emergency stop switch just in case.

At Baum’s, you can embark on a chocolate-tasting tour of the scent and taste of chocolate from around the world, because where the cacao plant is grown can influence the flavor of the beans.

Sample white chocolate from

Madagascar, milk chocolate from the United States and South America, and semisweet to bitter dark chocolate from the Caribbean, Central America and South America.

Can’t get enough chocolate? Join Baum’s Club Cocoa-pelli for a discount on purchases and updates on upcoming events and new products. This year, Baum’s plans more activities for the community and will be the location for a Red Cross blood drive every 56 days.

The candy shop was in the same location in Westgate Shopping Center in Richland until 2009, when Catholic Family Services wanted to expand. The Vances found a location in West Richland and began renovating, opening the new store in April 2010.

“We are pleased so many loyal customers have moved with us, along with the new friends who are treating themselves to our candy,” says Gayle. ■

Baum’s House of Chocolates is on 4033 Van Giesen, Suite H, in West Richland. Call (509) 967-9340, fax (509) 967-7232 or go to www.baumscandy.com or Baum’s Candy on Facebook. Store hours are Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. The store is closed on Sunday. Baum’s chocolates also are available at www.ShopTheNorthwest.com.