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HOW ONE ESSEX WOMAN'S SWEET TOOTH LED TO A SUCCESSFUL LIFE MAKING LUXURY CHOCOLATE P24-25



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By **LOUISE HOWESON**

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POSH chocolate-maker Amelia Rope used to deny herself sweet pleasures.

She was overweight and would obsess over nutrition and avoiding "bad" foods.

But then she found a passion for chocolate-making and says her drive for creating decadent sweet treats has made her happier, healthier and more fulfilled than ever.

Amelia, who grew up in Layer Marney, eats chocolate all day, every day. The self-confessed addict even has chocolate for breakfast.

Amelia says: "I used to be overweight and back then I would deny myself any sweets things. I was obsessed with nutrition and finding out why I couldn't lose weight."

"I was a size 14 to 16, and now I am a size eight. I have found that denying myself is not the answer. I eat what I like and just want enough to satisfy my taste buds. And that just happens to be chocolate."

Amelia's daily diet is a choco-holic's idea of heaven.

She says: "I tend to eat a disgusting amount of chocolate during the day, because I always have some at my desk. I do everything on the hoof and so I don't really think about when or where I am going to be eating that day."

"I have a bit of chocolate for

I used to deny myself chocolate...now I've made a living out of it

breakfast and work through it throughout the day. It peps me up. I can overdo the sugar, so in the evening I steer clear of anything sweet and have something simple, like a big bowl of steaming veg with oil and lemon juice poured over. I am vegetarian, so apart from the chocolate I eat very cleanly."

Amelia is not the only one who cannot

resist her brand of luxury chocolate. It flies off the shelves at Selfridges, Liberty and Fortnum and Mason.

Her training as an aromatherapist has seen Amelia expertly infuse the chocolate with flavours such as rose, lemon and sea-salt, mandarin and a gorgeous, crackly coffee-bean dark choco-

late. Her artisan product, which sells for more than £6 a bar, is one of the most fashionable brands in Britain right now.

She brings out "collections" of chocolate like a fashion brand and currently has the dark, pale, white and cube ranges.

Amelia, who went to St Mary's School, in Lexden, Colchester, says: "I always wanted to be a fashion designer as a child and so

this is how I approach it. I don't do novelty Christmas combinations – I go with what I think works and ideas come to me all the time."

Amelia has made some big sacrifices for the business which she started in 2007.

She has fended off bailiffs, sold her flat, slept on friends' floors for more than a year, lived with her brother for two and a half years and

I am a rebel – always have been. At school they hated me, because I never did what I was told

■ **Cocoa queen** – Amelia Rope with some of her range of chocolate
Picture: **LUCY YOUNG**

HOW TO TEMPER CHOCOLATE

IF you heat and cool chocolate without controlling the temperature, you'll be left with crystals of different sizes forming, and your chocolate will bloom – that is to say it will appear matt and covered with white patches. It will also crumble unpleasantly, rather than snap. In order to avoid this, you will need to temper your chocolate.

Amelia's chocolate recipes are top secret, but if you fancy tempering your own chocolate at home without a marble slab, here's how. This tempering method uses the addition of finely chopped pieces, disks or pistoles of chocolate into already-melted chocolate. Adding stable, crystallised chocolate lowers the temperature naturally, enabling regular crystallisation of the chocolate mass. The method is a replacement for using a marble working surface or a cold-water bath.

What you'll need:

400 g (14 oz) chocolate, serrated knife, kitchen thermometer, flexible spatula and food processor fitted with a blade attachment.

Method:

Chop three quarters of the chocolate on a chopping board, using a serrated knife or use couverture chocolate in the form of feves, buttons or pistoles. Finely chop the remaining quarter or process it with the blade knife attachment of a food processor. Place the roughly-chopped chocolate in a bowl. Half fill a saucepan with hot water, and put the bowl over it, making sure that the bowl does not touch the bottom of the saucepan. Slowly heat the water, ensuring it does not boil. Alternatively, use a microwave oven if you wish, but in defrost position or at 500W maximum. Stir regularly using a flexible spatula, so the chocolate melts smoothly. Check the temperature with a thermometer. When it reaches 55C-58C (131F-136F) for bittersweet/dark, or 45C-50C (113F-122F) for milk or white, remove the chocolate from the bain-marie. Set aside one-third of the melted chocolate in a bowl, in a warm place. Add the remaining finely-chopped quarter of the chocolate

into the remaining two-thirds of the melted chocolate, stirring constantly.

Bittersweet/dark chocolate should reach a temperature of 28C-29C (82F-84F), milk chocolate should reach 27C-28C (81F-82F) and white or coloured chocolate should reach 26C-27C (79F-81F). Then add the melted chocolate you have set aside to increase the temperature. Bittersweet/dark chocolate should reach 31C-32C (88F-90F), milk chocolate should reach 29C-30C (84F-86F) and white or coloured chocolate should reach 28C-29C (82F-84F). Stir until the right temperature is reached.

Top tip: If the chocolate has attained the right temperature and there are still pieces of unmelted chocolate, remove them before increasing the temperature. If you leave them, the chocolate will thicken very quickly and become sticky because of over-crystallisation.

■ From the Valrhona Chocolate book – Cooking with Chocolate, published by Flammarion.



taste

scraped together cash from friends to fill orders when the banks wouldn't give her a loan.

When did her love of chocolate start?

She says: "I remember being eight and tasting the amazing truffles my father bought for my grandmother. They were from Presdat, the chocolatier with a royal warrant from the Queen for more than 35 years."

"As a teen, I ate a lot of cheap chocolate and I liked it all. Later, when I gained weight, I stopped eating chocolate altogether."

Amelia's journey started in 2006 when she went on Masterchef. She didn't win, but after encouragement from John Torode, she went back on in 2007.

She was given the boost to start her own chocolate-making brand when Pat Reeves, founder of **sofa.com**, commissioned her first collection.

She says: "He believed in what I was doing. He kept saying I should create a chocolate collection and he would commission the first one, but I kept saying no. Before that, I was making crystallised flora and bespoke truffles on commission, but Pat knew that I had a good idea with the chocolate."

"Eventually I decided to take up his offer and I needed £7,000 to start it, but the bank wouldn't lend. I campaigned to my MP and raised the money myself."

Amelia left her steady job as a PA in a doctor's surgery and decided to go part-time, get some spare cash from the sale of her flat and go on as many courses as possible.

Her gamble paid off and she now has a team of six people

helping her and a turnover of £450,000.

She says: "If I died now, I would be so proud of what I have achieved. I never thought even five years ago it would be at this point."

She is happy that she broke away from the traditional life.

She says: "I am a rebel – always have been. At school they hated me, because I never did what I was told."

"I didn't go to uni and did marry in my twenties, like what was expected, and I left my job as a secretary."

"However, now my

family are so proud of what I have achieved."

"My brother Simon supported me so much. He let me sleep on his sofa for two and a half years and he is now a shareholder. I want the business to be good, so I can give him something back."

Although in her own

words Amelia "has no official training in anything" she does, she does have heaps of enthusiasm.

Her tenacity and belief in her business has also made her stubborn about how things should be done.

She says: "I won't compromise on anything. With my cube collection, I had a lot of people ask me to change the shape, because they are hand-wrapped and so it is hard to wrap each one."

"But it is how I wanted it and had to be that way. I never accept no as an answer."

The job is full on and takes up a lot of

Amelia's time. She says: "I didn't have children and so business is my baby. It is also like a marriage which has been through divorce and got back on track as well!"

Amelia comes up with new recipes all of the time.

She says: "Recipes come to me from anywhere. I can be walking down the street and I will come up with a flavour combination."

"I am very stubborn. I don't have any tasters. I know myself what I like and I don't want to

I don't have any tasters. I know myself what I like and I don't want to compromise

compromise. I am also not very good at listening to criticism. That said, I am my own harshest critic anyway and I am tough on myself."

Her latest collections come from a variety of places.

She says: "I came up with the idea of the white collection when I was in bed with sinusitis and a chest infection. I hadn't eaten or drunk anything for four days and when I came around from it, I was feeling so weak."

"All I craved was white chocolate. I went out and bought a load of Milky Bars. I melted them in a bain-marie over hot water with some base white chocolate I had and mixed in some Maldon sea salt and ate the lot."

"I was scraping out the bowl, it was so delicious. I didn't bother to temper it and make it shiny and smooth, because I didn't have the energy."

"After that, I brought out the white collection which I said I would never do before."

AMELIA SAYS...

Intricate design:

"All of the chocolates are hand-wrapped and so a lot of people wanted me to change the shape with the cube edition because it is a pain to wrap. But it was important to me that the cube edition looked exactly this way."

Aromatherapy:

"I infuse the chocolate with flavours and smells, the same way I would mix up aromatherapy oils. My pale lemon and Maldon sea salt chocolate, for example, has that subtle taste of lemon that works like aromatherapy in that it invigorates without being overbearing."

Health by chocolate:

"My chocolates work in different ways. My dark chocolate with raspberries is very luxurious and not too sweet. It makes you feel good."

The handmade effect:

"Because the chocolates are made by hand, rather than in a factory, they can vary. There might be one less pecan on one side of a pale honey pecan and Maldon sea salt bar than the other, but I like to think that it gives the bars charm."

