

Word of mouth Carolyn Hart meets Amelia Rope, master chocolatier

Amelia Rope... she sounds like a character out of a children's story book, a feeling compounded by the fact that she spends her days thinking up new combinations of flavours for chocolate bars. You imagine that she'll be encased in a pinafore and wearing stripy stockings and sensible shoes.

The reality is very different. Ms Rope arrives like a streak of burnished light, her glowing auburn hair lit up by the sun, and wearing a turquoise lace miniskirt and heels. Rope, 42, grew up in Essex but now lives in Brixton, south London. She began her entrepreneurial life aged 10 or so, selling horse manure ('I wasn't given pocket money'), and has worked as a potato harvester, sold vintage clothing and made Christmas cakes. She's been a waitress, sold mousetraps and qualified as an aromatherapist.

But how did she become a chocolatier? 'I'd been watching *MasterChef*,' she says, 'and thought, I could do this.' She applied to go on the programme in 2005, was picked and, although she had never been taught to cook, got through one round before being kicked off. But by then, John Torode had told her that she had 'something about her'. Thus encouraged,



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ALEX FARQUHAR

she sold her flat and used some of the proceeds to go on a chocolate course at Valrhona. 'I was fascinated by chocolate,' she says. 'To me it was as interesting and complicated as wine or coffee.'

She took a box of her chocolate mint truffles to the food journalist William Sitwell, who took one bite and said, 'My God, you are the next Juliet Binoche.' By then she had realised that the skills she had learnt from aromatherapy were very handy when it came to blending different flavours for chocolates. 'I realised I could let the different oils sit in the chocolate and see what developed,' she explains. 'Mint oil is very feisty; lemon and mandarin less full-on. The aim is not to force the flavour through – I want you to eat them and get a sensation of the flavour.' Her product is unexpectedly light to taste, the flavourings – sea salt, lime, lemon, rose and coffee – clear and precise, slightly other-worldly.

Rope started out in 2007 making crystallised rose and viola petals and mint leaves dipped in chocolate. 'I landed a client from the Middle East who sent her jet over to pick up the petals,' she says.

Her next push forward came in the form of a friend, Pat Reeves, the founder

of sofa.com. 'He wanted a chocolate bar to send out with the sofas,' she says. 'I said no, chocolate bars are boring. So he put in an order for 1,000 bars. Of course, I had to do it. Each bar came in pale pink wrapping, handwritten by me. Suddenly I had a business.'

She sells in Selfridges, Liberty and in the US, Dubai and Malaysia. What next? Well, tomorrow she is off to her kitchen in the Midlands where she has a team of six, to play around with a new flavour. What is it? 'I can't tell you,' she says. 'I'm obsessed about spies...'

This month she is bringing out boxes of handmade chocolate cubes ('One will be a sea salt collection'), and bespoke bars ('the client can choose the recipe, ribbon and packaging').

She now sells thousands of bars each month. Where does she see herself in 10 years' time? 'On holiday,' she says. 'I took only Christmas Day off last year. I'll always do chocolate, but I might broaden my brand. I want to be established worldwide and possibly have a shop in an arcade in London. I want to see how far I can go.'

Amelia Rope chocolate bars, £5.60 for 100g (ameliarope.com)

What's on

Suffolk lunch The Aldeburgh Food & Drink Festival (Sept 29-Oct 14) offers a fortnight of culinary delights. Chefs on hand will include Valentine Warner, Angela Hartnett and Matthew Fort; there'll be field-to-fork fringe events and loads of excellent Suffolk grub. Tickets from £6, aldeburghfoodanddrink.co.uk.

Goad Gordon With his new book, *Gordon Ramsay's Ultimate Cookery Course* (£25, Hodder & Stoughton), Ramsay goes back to basics; a 10-part TV series follows this month. He will be signing copies of his book on Sept 20, 12.30-2pm at Waterstones Jubilee Place, Canary Wharf (0843-290 8209).

Super suppers Book now for Daylesford's monthly supper club, held at its London farmshops on the last Thursday of each month – the next is on Sept 27. A three-course supper celebrating the best of what's in season costs £35 pp, excluding drinks. At Westbourne Grove (020-7313 8050) and Pimlico Road (020-7881 8060).

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RECIPES FROM THE KITCHEN DRAWER
A book of simple recipes in comic strip form by Helen Ashley

No 1 Pesto serves 4

50g pine nuts
3 cloves of garlic
25g fresh mint leaves
50g fresh basil leaves
the juice of ½ lemon
3 tbsp olive oil
50g Parmesan, plus extra to serve
400g pasta

Recipes From the Kitchen Drawer is available for £8.50 plus £1.10 p&p from Telegraph Books (0844-871 1514; books.telegraph.co.uk)

1. toast 50g pine nuts under grill for 2-3 mins until lightly browned.

2. coarsely chop 3 cloves of garlic, 25g mint leaves, & 50g basil leaves.

3. pound ingredients together, gradually adding 3tbsp olive oil, until a thick paste is formed.

4. stir in 50g freshly grated parmesan. Serve mixed into freshly cooked pasta, adding additional cheese if desired.

place in a pestle & mortar with salt, pepper, nuts, & juice of ½ lemon.