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CATERING TO A NEW PALATE

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WAUKESHA - When Julie Waterman went on a honeymoon throughout Europe two years ago, she and her husband, Brian, had a chance to visit some of the finest chocolatiers in the world.

"I understood the energy and passion that went into it," Waterman said of the trip.

She came back home with not only a greater appreciation of the popular dessert, but with plans for a business of her own.

The former Army National Guard member found herself playing with a number of recipes, looking to replicate the quality of the shops she visited across the Atlantic.

Last month, Waterman started **Indulgence** Chocolatiers, a caterer and online retailer of fine chocolates that borrows from the European confectionery tradition.

While Waterman prepares a variety of desserts - including chocolate-dipped strawberries and pastries filled with chocolate ganache - the real specialty of her Waukesha business is the truffle.

The treat features a hard outer shell with a creamy chocolate middle that Waterman usually infuses with a flavoring such as cherry, peanut butter or mint.

The chocolate Waterman uses is of the Belgian variety, characterized by its rich, smooth taste.

Currently, about half of the Waukesha resident's business comes from sales off her Web site - indulgencechocolatiers.com. A box of 12 truffles sells for \$22, with a collection of 24 going for \$43.

Many customers buy her truffles as gifts, looking to give their loved ones a distinct, handmade treat.

"It's really an experience," Waterman said.

A new niche

The rest of Waterman's sales come from catering special events and packaging her creations as party favors.

She said a growing number of people are opting to serve fine chocolates at weddings, bar and bat mitzvahs and corporate events - often times finding it more suitable than dessert staples such as cake.

Waterman said people can mingle with other guests while enjoying the dessert. Chocolates also pairs well with wine.

Carrie Igielski, the co-owner of Amy Lyn's Chocolates in downtown Waukesha, said the demand for such confections at special events is strong, as party planners see it as a good way to make a lasting impression.

"I think people feel like they're pampering their guests," said Igielski. "It's a very nice touch to their event."

Creating a buzz

The popularity of dark chocolates has only grown, Waterman said, with news reports in recent years about its health benefits.

The health-conscious have an added reason to like **Indulgence** Chocolatiers as the operation steers clear of using preservatives in its desserts. For that reason they should be consumed within two weeks of purchase, Waterman said.

Waterman said she's been advertising her unique business through wedding resources such as Premier Bride magazine and theknot.com.

A lot of business, however, is coming in simply through word-of-mouth.

While she's at present a one-person operation, she said there will likely be a need to add staff as word of her business grows and next year's wedding season hits full swing.

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