



Chocolate for Christmas

Shirlee and Jane of Eat Surrey seek and find the best small food producers, restaurants, cafés, pubs and shops, publishing weekly reviews on their website. Here Shirlee introduces essence readers to a local, favourite chocolatier.

With Christmas nudging its way onto our autumn radar, interesting present ideas and entertaining inspiration start to attract attention. Luckily, writing the blog I have discovered some real Surrey treasures and have started buying artisan foodie gifts, which support local producers.

One favourite is a small, but unassuming artisan chocolate producer: Ildiko's Chocolates based in Walton-on-Thames. Having met Tamas and Ildiko eighteen months ago at a food festival, it's been fantastic to see how this business has developed. Luring customers to their stall with rich, white and dark chocolate slabs adorned with delicately placed dried berries, wasabi peas, smoked salt, pistachios and pomegranate seeds, the wares are difficult to resist. Sure, there are lots of small producers out there, but far too many are making jam, chutney and fudge that's all too familiar and sadly a bit dull. Not the case here at all! Stunning presentation, original combinations and a very sweet couple. After meeting a few times, they agreed to an interview.

Ildiko left Hungary a few years ago, giving up a career as an environmental engineer, to look after her young family. Tamas, a hotel manager, had secured a job in the UK so they bravely upped sticks and moved. Wanting to fit work around her children, Ildiko unleashed her inner creativity and turned her hobby of making chocolates into

a business. Her interest, she says, started as a child when she cooked with her grandmother who showed her how to make pralines and other sweet temptations. Pralines were not as popular here, so Ildiko, encouraged by Tamas, experimented with chocolate slabs.

Sourcing good quality chocolate at a competitive price came first and then the flavour combinations. Scouring the internet for ideas, her ingredient cupboard is truly exotic: blackcurrant pepper, chocolate coated goji berries and edible flower petals are just a few. Ildiko's is a truly cottage style industry where everything is made by hand. The only exception is the use of a small commercial tempering machine purchased when sales started to take off. That aside, the chocolate slabs are hand filled and decorated in their Surrey home.

Tamas and Ildiko recently opened their first retail outlet as part of a co-operative at the Medicine Garden in Cobham. When the original trader left, an opportunity arose to bring a group of artisan producers together to share the running of the shop. So far it's been a success and Ildiko's fans can now buy her chocolates every day. If you already know the Medicine Garden and love it too, you'll know this is a magical venture in Cobham, nestled in a unique Victorian walled garden. Nowadays it has a café, gift shop and plant centre alongside therapy rooms and stages a whole host of events.



So there are lots of good reasons to visit this venue, chocolate aside.

In addition to chocolates, our enterprising chocolatier also makes a range of delicious caramel sauces. I sampled these during the time we spent together and I became hooked on the chocolate, sea salt, lavender and clotted cream. No wonder Ildiko's clotted cream caramel sauce won a gold star this summer at the Great Taste Awards: it is really good! Soft and silky on the tongue, sweet and creamy, each sauce flavour brings a new twist. After the interview I left Ildiko and Tamas' home with a bag of goodies to use as gifts and a jar of caramel sauce.

Last week Ildiko's lavender caramel sauce featured in a simple recipe I had been cultivating. I was having a girls only dinner and had opted for cheese and fruit for dessert. To go with coffee, I wanted something sweet to offer that was small, but had the wow factor. A big fan of gourmet sea salts, and with a growing collection to experiment with, I came up with these gorgeous tarts. Served with coffee, my guests raved about them so much they each took a couple home. ●

essence info

Websites: www.shirleeandjaneatsurrey.com,
www.ildikoschocolate.co.uk
Visit the larder co-operative at the Medicine Garden, www.themedicinegarden.com.



Salted chocolate and lavender caramel tarts

Makes 24 tarts (using a mini-muffin tin)

***1 x 400g pack of short crust pastry**
One jar Ildiko's lavender caramel sauce
50g white chocolate
50g dark chocolate
150ml double cream
Malden sea salt flakes, plain or smoked
Red Hawaiian salt
Black Hawaiian salt

- 1) Pre-heat the oven to 180°C/fan 160°C/gas mark 5.
- 2) Roll out the pastry as thin as possible and cut 24 x 7cm circles.
- 3) Grease the muffin tray and ease the pastry gently down into each hole using a wooden pastry pusher or small rolling pin. It is possible to do this with fingers, just make sure the pastry does not break.
- 4) Bake in the oven for seven to eight minutes, then remove and reshape using the pusher.
- 5) Return to the oven until golden brown.
- 6) Remove and place on a rack to cool.
- 7) Meanwhile make the ganache. Place the white and dark chocolate with 75ml cream in two separate bowls and melt in the microwave, heating for no more than 20 seconds at a time. Mix regularly helping the chocolate to melt. Alternatively melt over hot water in a small pan taking care not to overheat.
- 8) Divide the caramel equally between the pastry cases. If easier, use an icing bag with a large nozzle.
- 9) Spoon over the chocolate ganache and top each with a few flakes of sea salt. I used black, red and plain Malden salt for mine, but one kind of salt is just as good.
- 10) Allow the chocolate to set and serve as a dessert canapé.

** I had some pastry left over which I used to thinly line a 22cm flan tin which is now in the freezer until I need it.*