



## Mimi Wheeler, Grocer's Daughter Chocolate

*Why did you become a business owner and what significant factors led you?*

I grew up in an entrepreneurial family in Denmark. I strayed from this lifestyle to the cause of social justice and I became a social worker for 25 years before taking the leap to business ownership. During child rearing years my mind was always “brewing” some kind of new business venture. Chocolate was always in my “primary food group.” I would bring chocolate to gatherings with friends and I would be encouraged to start a business creating and selling chocolate.

*What prepared you (or didn't!) for business ownership?*

I left a social work position very disillusioned and my frustrations/feelings of unfairness clearly fueled my desire to work hard and be successful in my new endeavors. My greatest gift continues to be surrounding myself with resourceful and creative people who continue to inspire me to reinvent myself. I am inspired by other creative food artists, their ideas and endeavors. My husband supported me financially and family and friends were very encouraging. My greatest challenge is that I am “right-brained” and bookkeeping, computer skills and organization are not my strong point and never will be.

*What or who inspired you?*

Travels to Europe (Scandinavia and Southern France) as well as trips to the east and west coasts put me in touch with chocolatiers (the French word for someone who creates confections with chocolate). Some of these contacts gave me technical advice and inspired new flavor combinations for me to play with. I also found important long distance mentoring from a former chocolate business owner – a friend of a friend. I reached out to many people and said, “I am looking for someone who knows technical information about chocolate” and I had invaluable contacts with this outreach. Zingerman's in Ann Arbor helped shape me in their support of my growing production and sales to this internationally known food “Mecca.” I found a very fine chocolate producer and became affiliated with the Rainforest Alliance through them.

*What do you enjoy most about business ownership?*

Contact with customers, other food and other business owners. I do love my home mornings where I usually work on my computer over a cup of coffee and have a co-worker open the shop and start the daily preparations. We are in quaint little Empire and

perched on a dune only a few minutes from the great Lake Michigan. Customers, interns, and staff have entered this colorful cocoa pod colored shop from all walks of life and great discussions of travel and tastings continue to happen.

*What surprised you most?*

Owning a small business is for me like having a toddler again. My children are on their own and are 28 and 30 years old. I live with the business on my mind whether I am working or not. My daughter has at times reminded me that “life is not all about Grocer’s Daughter Chocolate.”

*Who or what keeps you motivated?*

I love creating chocolate and coming up with new recipes. Many customers contact us with feedback and ideas or with special requests, and challenges keep coming. I find great inspiration in my work with six other area food businesses with a somewhat similar food philosophy, and I find our collaboration and cross marketing very exciting. I have been exceedingly lucky to have wonderful help in the business: people who currently work with me, others who circled through the business and left lasting impressions (like chocolate named after them, i.e. the Wally Bar). I work with an inspiring chocolate producer, I watch the politics behind the chocolate and I have visited and participated in the harvest of cocoa pods in Ecuador.

*What advice do you have for women considering or in the beginning stages of ownership?*

I started on a “shoestring” and I believe in this model. Learn as much as you can about your field of interest. Do your homework and some more. Talk to your competitors and try to find an original service that is different from what is available.

Don’t give up your day job early on unless you have other means to support yourself. ASK FOR HELP! Most of us are very happy to help out other businesses when requested to do so.