

Dream job

Turning chocolate into sweet success

Katrina Markoff

WHERE SHE WORKS

Chicago

SALARY IN 2006

\$80,000

Out-of-the-box cooking Katrina Markoff has always been adventurous: After earning a degree from Le Cordon Bleu, a top culinary school in Paris, she bought an East-bound plane ticket and set off to “embrace the street foods” of different countries, from Vietnam to Australia. Eight months later, in 1997, Markoff returned to the United States and got a job with her uncle’s mail-order company. But soon she realized what she really wanted to do: use the culinary skills she’d acquired overseas to make exotic truffles. “Most chocolates are boring,” says Markoff, 31. “I knew there was a niche to fill.”

Sweet but spicy For surprising recipes, Markoff tore through her personal cookbooks and the notes she’d taken in other countries. Then she spent three months blending

chocolate and spices in a saucepan until she came up with her premier recipes: Naga, a concoction of sweet curry and coconut; Budapest, a dark chocolate with paprika; and Black Pearl, a blend of ginger and wasabi, topped with sesame seeds. “My friends thought the flavors sounded disgusting,” Markoff says. “But then they’d eat the truffles and a blissful look would cross their faces.”



Full-time leap With a \$50,000 loan from the Small Business Association, Markoff quit her job in 1998 and opened her shop, Vosges Haut-Chocolat, in Chicago. Once she found a local kitchen where she could produce her candies in bulk, Markoff launched her Web site, vosgeschocolate.com.

Then came her first big break: She pitched her products to the local Neiman Marcus department store. At first, the buyer didn’t seem impressed—“My boxes weren’t as pretty as they are now,” Markoff says, laughing—but she left samples. Much to her surprise, he called the

next day to request more. “Turns out his coworkers had eaten every truffle before he had a chance to try one,” Markoff says. “He wanted to know what all the fuss was about.” Within months, she had a major deal with the upscale retailer.

Borrowing to build In 2002, Markoff took out more loans and set up a manufacturing plant in Chicago. “It was a huge investment, but it ultimately helped me produce more,” she says. Today, she has a second store in Chicago, one in New York City, and another in Las Vegas.

Bottom line Revenue reached about \$7 million in 2006. Markoff takes home \$80,000; she could give herself more, but she’d rather pay down debts and grow the company (she launches at least four new products a year). Has she hired another chef to create recipes? No, she says: “I create the flavors—if I didn’t, it wouldn’t be Vosges.” —Patricia Greco



Secret ingredients: chocolate, spice, and faith in her niche

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