

In Vosges...

The Spice Girl of
Haut-Chocolat

BY MARILYN LaROcQUE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM K. DECKER

Meet Katrina Markoff, the spice girl of Vosges Haut-Chocolat. Her kitchen cupboards hold ingredients for her chocolate truffles that would give the Iron Chefs a run for their money. European chocolate nestles next to paprika and pearl dust, curry and chilies. Music history comes alive with flavor, and Yoga develops a sweet tooth.



MAKE MINE CHOCOLATE

Katrina Markoff studied at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris. "I always loved the sweet side of the kitchen," she admitted. "I later trained with Ferran Adria at El Bulli in Roses, Spain. He does very unique things with food, things like basil gelatin, curry chicken savory ice cream, candied quail eggs like lollipops—really outside the box. He got me thinking outside the normal realm.

"I traveled around the world learning about different cuisines and writing recipes for a cookbook about desserts, but I never finished it. When I got back to the U.S., I decided I wasn't orderly enough to be a chef. So I researched ingredients and came to chocolate. It's such a magical, mystical story. Aztec men used it for power before they went into battle or before they made love because they considered it an aphrodisiac. Montezuma reportedly drank cacao with chilies before being with his wife. Cortez brought it to Europe."

Katrina's explorations "outside the box" lead her to other cultures, artists, architects, philosophies, and movements when she creates her chocolates. "Chocolate becomes a medium for experiencing life," she said. "I use it as storytelling and an incredible food experience. I infuse it with spices, wild stuff, to make it interesting, to layer flavors because they unfold at different times, to make it festive, avant garde.

"What I love about doing WOW ingredients is they make people really pause before they put one of my truffles into their mouths, and into their minds, too," she emphasized. "You must never hurry with chocolate. So, in the moment when someone takes a bit, they have an incredibly amplified experience. They discover amazing new ideas about people, food, everything. They're saying to themselves, 'Hmm...guess I shouldn't have prejudged it... now let me try the next one'."

EXOTICA

Katrina's kitchen is in Chicago where there are two Vosges Haut-Chocolat Boutiques, the others are in New York's SoHo and Las Vegas's own Forum Shops IV at Caesars Palace. Her cacao beans are grown primarily in Venezuela, Colombia, Brazil, Chile, and Tanzania. They're made into dark, milk, and white chocolate in Belgium, Switzerland, and France. The spices and exotica that elevate Katrina's chocolates to nirvana status come from all over the world.

Katrina discovered one of the most extraordinary ingredients while traveling in

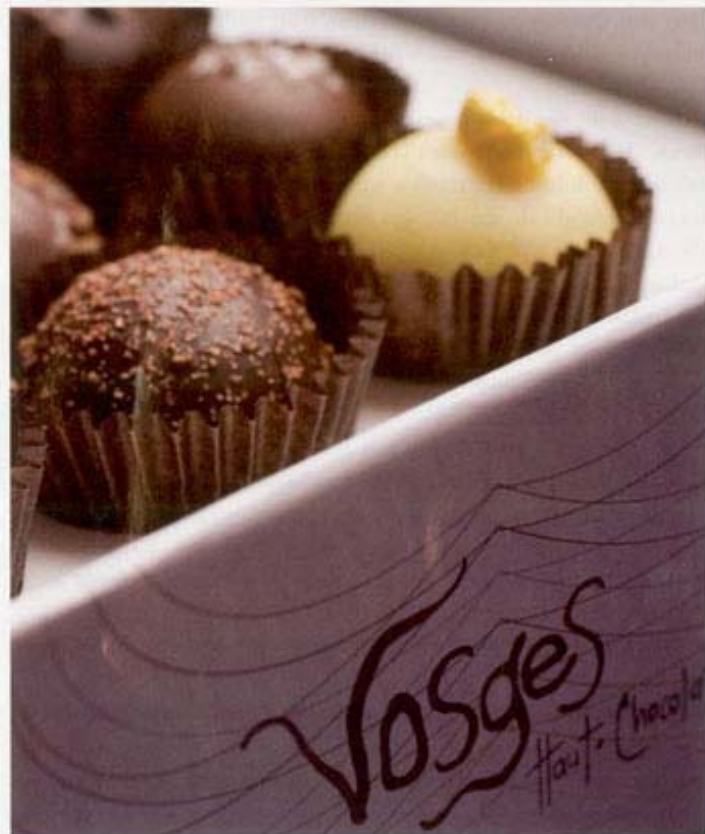
Asia. "I saw them using pearl dust in drinks, in champagne to make it bubble, in face powder," she explained. "It's an old, old ingredient and considered an aphrodisiac. Luisa Casati was a scandalous Italian woman who roamed the streets draped in pearls and accompanied by her pet cheetahs. I dust a black sea salt caramel truffle with pearl dust in a collection I call 'Marchesa Casati'.

"I found paprika in an old 1900's French recipe," she continued. "I use sweet Hungarian paprika in a dark chocolate truffle (Budapest). I remembered that the famous artist Toulouse Lautrec was addicted to absinthe. Although I scarcely go that far, I infuse Chinese star anise seed, a splash of Pastis (an anisette liqueur from the South of France), and fennel in a dark chocolate truffle (Absinthe). Mole negro of the state of Oaxaca in southern Mexican inspired me to add guajillo chili pepper and pasila chili to dark Tanzania chocolate and top the truffle with organic pumpkin seeds."

Japanese ginger, Oregon wasabi, and black sesame seeds (Black Pearl), candied violets from the South of France (Viola), and sweet Indian curry and coconut borrowed from the foods of tribes of Northeast India (Naga) accent other truffles. Katrina does have a somewhat tamer side, however. Macadamia nuts and Cointreau, Kirsch and dried Michigan cherries, pralines and pecans satisfy the less adventuresome.

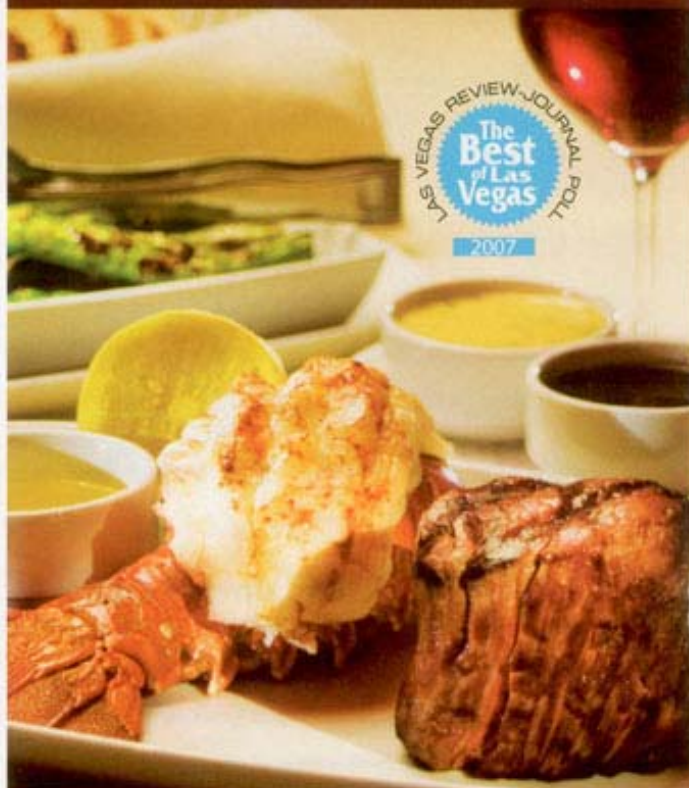
IN THE GROOVE

No music appreciation course comes close to the creativity of Katrina's Groove Truffle Collection. "I was driving along in my car with the radio on," she said, "and every station was playing music with African or African-American roots—hip-hop, R&B, rap. I realized there's this whole history of music that I could tie in with food and tell a story. So I came up with 12 different genres, licensed a song for each one and related it to artists of the time, and added popular food ingredients of the era to the truffles."



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