



# *Chocolate or Art?*

By Charlene Oldham. Photography courtesy of Phillip Ashley

Visitors to Phillip Ashley Chocolates can sample about 20 creations, each piece painstakingly designed and laid out in display cases like fine jewelry, while perusing original artworks and possibly sipping a complimentary blood orange margarita. A shopping trip a month later might mean a new art exhibit, set off by a flute of champagne and a different selection from Phillip Ashley's arsenal of about 170 flavor combinations that doesn't include a single variation on the chocolate-covered pretzel or other standard confectionery fare.



PHILLIP ASHLEY  
CHOCOLATES

“We’re not a candy store,” said chocolatier Phillip Ashley Rix from his 1,300-square-foot studio in Memphis’ Cooper Young District. “I’ve developed it as a chocolate boutique and design studio because we are not just making chocolate, we are designing chocolate and creating concepts of look and flavor.”

But Rix was a sales and marketing executive with no formal culinary training when the inspiration to develop designer chocolates took hold in 2007, so he had to learn to fill molds before he could break them. In those days, there were few programs and classes devoted to chocolate making. That drove Rix to embark on his own program of study that hasn’t ended yet.

“No one was really teaching it, so I just found the information wherever I could, read whatever I could,” said Rix. “Really, imagination and insight into cooking helped me do the rest.”

Rix wanted to radically expand on the one- or two-note flavors already available by using unconventional ingredients like bleu cheese or barbecue sauce. Today, exotic offerings include the Geisha, a layered flavor combination of white tea, dried cherries and rose water. One of Rix’s favorites is a praline that reminds him of pecan pies from his grandmothers’ kitchens and substitutes rich bourbon molasses for standard Karo syrup. “It’s called Magazine Street and it was inspired by just hanging out in New Orleans,” he said “I was like, ‘Man, there is a praline store on every corner here.’”

Rix draws inspiration from all sorts of people, places

and events. And the store’s offerings are driven by seasonality and availability of ingredients. That means a favorite flavor might be off the menu for months, yet Rix wants to perfect the recipe to ensure it tastes the same every time.

“I wanted to be able to create and really compose flavors in chocolate, not just put a bunch of stuff in chocolate just because it sounds good or it’s intriguing,” he said. “I wanted to create my own perspective, my own viewpoint in food through chocolate.”

Chocolate making is intuitive, but also grounded in science and mathematics, which inspired Rix to name his original venture Chocistry, which is still the philosophy behind his eponymous brand.

“It was really kind of me fusing the history, chemistry and artistry of chocolate making. Chocistry is just the science of what Phillip Ashley is and does.”

That meticulous approach led to several years of Rix spending his days in corporate jobs at FedEx, UPS and Apple and his nights in the kitchen, supplying chocolates for events and selling online and at pop-up locations. Soon, people were asking Rix where they could find his permanent storefront, prompting him to open Phillip Ashley Chocolates in November 2013 and get back into the full-time business of marketing, this time for himself.

“I didn’t spend my whole career in the kitchen. I spent it talking to people from the warehouse to the CEO’s office,” he said. “I don’t know if things would be going as well or if the business would exist at all if I’d have gone straight into culinary

school out of high school. I wouldn't have had the exposure from a business and a marketing perspective that I have."

And, like the Apple Stores operated by one former employer, Phillip Ashley Chocolates offers events that add to the retail experience. Complimentary cocktails are a frequent feature and, for a fee, the monthly Spectrum series offers a flight of seven spirits paired with chocolates. Artists regularly host openings for exhibits at the studio, where customers can purchase not only the chocolates, but the art.

"So, in that regard it's very much like an art gallery," he said. "It gives us another dimension, another reason for people to come in to the store. We want to bring something completely different to Memphis and the Mid-South."

Rix might eventually bring his unique approach to other markets, he said. Meanwhile, the married father of four founded the event planning company Phillip Ashley Presents earlier this year and is organizing the second annual Masquerade Charity Ball to benefit a handful of local nonprofits.

"There are times when I am working 16 hours a day. I'm on my feet all day and I'm in the lab or in the studio until three o'clock in the morning because we have a big project. There's just no way around it," he said. "I love it even when I hate it. I chose to do this and I couldn't see myself doing something else."



*Intrigued?*

Visit [phillipashleychocolates.com](http://phillipashleychocolates.com).  
Enter code DeSoto 15 to receive 15 percent off your purchase.



2631 McIngvale Suite #106. Hernando, MS  
662.470.4843 M-F 11-6. Saturday 9-6.

  [BUNKERBOUTIQUE.COM](http://BUNKERBOUTIQUE.COM)



elizabeth hill weddings at Butterflies Florist.  
Call for an appointment.

 *Butterflies Florist*

bridal salon, formal/pageant wear + tuxedo rental

2270 Highway 51 South Hernando, MS 38632  
662-429-2342 • [www.elizabethhillweddings.com](http://www.elizabethhillweddings.com)