

PICTURE THIS



Sweet treats

JAEL AND DAN RATTIGAN LURE ASHEVILLE
VISITORS WITH ARTISAN CHOCOLATE.

PHOTOS BY MIKE BELLEME



Since its inception, French Broad has secured its chocolate from other sources. But two years ago, it began making some of its own chocolate, using cacao beans from Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Peru. In September, the transition was completed, with the company now creating all of its treats from bean to bar.

On almost any weekend evening year-round, chocolate lovers wait on the sidewalk outside the French Broad Chocolate Lounge on Pack Square in Asheville. Even on cold or rainy nights, dedicated consumers line the block. On a recent Saturday — always their busiest day — the Lounge served 900 customers seeking the best sellers: the Liquid Truffle sipping chocolate and the salted honey caramel. Last year, French Broad Luscious Chocolates LLC grossed \$2.6 million by selling 18 tons of chocolate: 12 tons from the 2,400-square-foot Lounge and 6 tons in bulk chocolate or bars sold to other businesses.

It's quite a success story for what began humbly. In 2003, Jael and Dan Rattigan met at a wedding in Minneapolis. Jael had a plane ticket to Costa Rica to attend an environmental-business seminar. She flew down, and Dan followed. "We fell in love with each other and with a small village on the southern Caribbean coast called Puerto Viejo," she says. They decided to drop out of graduate school at the University of Minnesota (she was in business school; he quit law school) and drove

a vegetable oil-powered school bus back to Costa Rica. They bought an abandoned, 5-acre cacao farm for \$10,000 and invested \$3,000 to start a café and dessert shop called Bread and Chocolate. "We got some education from microscale artisans on farms in Costa Rica," Dan says. "But most of our learning has been in our kitchen. We picked up books and tools and made it happen."

In 2006, the pair, who had married by then, decided to return to the states with their infant son, Sam, now 10. The Rattigans, who also have a second son, Max, 8, climbed back on the bus and, on the recommendation of some café customers, drove to Asheville, a place they'd never visited. "People said Asheville was a progressive culture with an emphasis on high-quality food," Dan says. The pair dug in, making chocolate desserts in their home kitchen and selling them at local farmers markets and online. The business outgrew their house, and in 2008, they opened the first incarnation of the French Broad Chocolate Lounge on Lexington Avenue, serving truffles, cookies, cakes and hot chocolates, along with beer and wine. "We got a \$60,000 business loan, and our



Employees roast the cacao beans at 250 to 300 degrees before grinding them for three days. The smooth, pure chocolate is then formed into bars that are left to age for four to six weeks. A chocolate maker, left, removes the husks from hazelnuts, which will be used in some of the candy.



Truffles are made by hand while they're still gooey, and then left to dry on racks before they're put out for sale.

parents each offered \$10,000," Jael says. "That's a shoestring for opening a restaurant, but we didn't understand that at the time."

Their timing proved perfect, their craft chocolate aligning with the craze for locally made beer and coffee. It helped that tourism has surged in Asheville, and that some residents are fanatical supporters of local small businesses. "The phenomenon we've become is incomprehensible," Dan says. "Our story starts out of a love affair, and that pushes us forward. We adore chocolate, and we adore Asheville, and we want the best for both."

French Broad borrowed \$500,000 to help finance a November move to its larger retail space and to expand its production site several

blocks away. Seventy people work for the business, including part-timers. "We've got deep roots now," Jael says. "We're not going anywhere."

They sell the chocolates at the lounge, at the chocolate factory, online, and at stores across North Carolina and in 19 other states and Canada. French Broad also carries 130 bars made by other companies. "We want to bring awareness and success to the whole craft-chocolate industry," she says. "A high tide raises all boats. We don't have to be greedy about this."

And greed isn't really part of their operation. Some people come to them, Dan says, after hearing about the company's approach to business, such as its environmental ethic and

effort to provide a living wage as defined by Asheville-based Just Economics, a nonprofit that encourages western North Carolina businesses to pay employees enough to cover basic expenses and health care costs. French Broad doesn't offer conventional insurance, but employees can take part in a cost-sharing plan through Integrative Family Medicine of Asheville PLLC. The lounge was named the seventh "greenest" restaurant in the country in 2014 by the Green Restaurant Association, particularly for its solar hot-water system and energy-efficient appliances.

In September, the company became its sole chocolate maker, purchasing cacao beans from Peru, Costa Rica and Nicaragua. "In a

year, we expect our first harvest of about 250 kilograms of cacao beans from our farm in Costa Rica," Dan says. Once fully planted, the farm should yield 1 metric ton a year. Starting with beans instead of buying the chocolate helps French Broad monitor growing practices and better control quality, Jael says.

Sometimes their values — paying employees well, using environmentally friendly appliances and making treats from raw cacao — have added benefit for the business, but that's not the only draw. "Some people seek us out because of our practices," says Dan. "And some people don't care one iota about our values. They just like chocolate."

— Dorothy Foltz-Gray

The shop sells all kinds of treats made from cacao, including candy, cakes, hot chocolate and specialty chocolates.