

Chocolatier Catherine Willingham turns up the heat

By Portia Little

If you can't stand the heat, stay out of Catherine Willingham's kitchen.

This Jamestown cooking expert and entrepreneur, who has created her own hot sauce using habenero peppers, is now turning up the heat even more by adding this spicy sauce to chocolate candy.

And while this flavor combination might sound strange to some folks, these confections, which Willingham describes as 'chocolates with a kick,' have received rave reviews from taste testers.

"This project began last summer," she said, "while I was canning my own garden produce. I love hot sauce, but the store-bought versions were often not hot enough for me, so I decided to make my own." After creating three different versions, she brought them into work, where one of her co-workers said she'd like to see the hot sauce in something sweet.

"I went home and made some truffles, then mixed in some spice," said Willingham. "I made the soft chocolate center, and then added some orange hot sauce to it as well as a few other ingredients, and rolled them into crushed chocolate. When I brought them back to work for a taste test, the ideas started

flowing. They said, 'these are really hot chocolates!'"

Thus was born the name for her product: "Hot Chocolates."

Now Willingham has her work cut out for her in terms of launching her own candy business. "I'm at the beginning stage," she said, "and I have a vision for the future that I'd like my chocolates to be a known entity." She acknowledges that she needs to get her business off the ground, to put all the pieces together to get established.

She is looking for advice and wisdom from people who have started their own companies and been successful. "The people at the first Women in Networking meeting in Jamestown were an inspiration to me," she said. "These people were at the beginning at one time too and they made it; they overcame the obstacles to obtaining their goals."

Several Jamestown businesswomen have stepped up to the hot plate to offer her some support. Phyllis Bedard, owner of Trattoria Simpatico, has shared her expertise and also helped her sign up for a food safety course. One of the first steps before Willingham can begin producing and selling her chocolates is to meet the safety requirements and have the



Photo by Andrew Hulme

approval of the board of health.

"Rena Tyson has been a big help to me too," said Willingham, who also displays and sells her Jamestown photographs in frames and on cards in Tyson's R & R Gallery at East Ferry. "We offered some of Catherine's 'hot chocolates' as

samples in our shop last summer," noted Tyson, "and they were very well received."

Another source of guidance and inspiration for Willingham has been Kristin Zhivago's book, "Rivers of Revenue," which she is now reading to find concrete ideas about launching and

carrying on a successful business.

Willingham hopes someday to sell her chocolates in some shops in Jamestown. "I've had a home here for four years. I love Jamestown, especially the people," she said. "If it's in my own power to accomplish my goals, I will do it."