



Life is sweet

**Sandrine May, 36, is a chocolatier. Originally from France, she lives in Canterbury, Kent with her husband and two young children.**

Looking back, becoming a chocolatier is all I have ever wanted to do – and it's funny to think that creating havoc in the kitchen with my mother was my first career move.

My mother was an excellent home cook, and was always very happy for me to experiment and make a mess in the kitchen. I cooked from a young age and started experimenting with sweets and chocolates in my early teens. But it was only five years ago that I thought I could turn my love of sweet things into a career and open a proper *chocolaterie*. I had been working as a team leader in a call centre for Eurotunnel, but didn't enjoy it. My husband, Kenton, an accountant, pushed me into turning my passion into a career. I don't think I would have dared if he hadn't believed in me.

The original shop opened three years ago in Lydd, a nearby town; we bought it from an old lady called Mrs Bird. I'm French and wanted a name that reflected this, so we called the shop Madame Oiseau in honour of the original owner. Then we moved to Canterbury when my husband bought into a partnership there. I love the new Madame Oiseau in Canterbury, but was initially reluctant to leave Lydd.

I'm totally self-taught, but gained some experience in my early twenties working in Nantucket Fine Chocolates, on Nantucket Island in the United States. They sold



**Sandrine as a sweet-toothed teenager**

**'I eat 10 chocolate truffles a day and don't put on weight'**

truffles, though not the kind that anyone in France would actually recognise! When I made a fresh *orangette* (candied orange dipped in chocolate), the owner just couldn't believe it.

I make all the different products I sell in Madame Oiseau from scratch, but when I first opened I didn't even know how to make an Easter egg! Luckily, I had time to practise. Some of my more unusual chocolates are lavender and violet *ganaches* (very different to

the sweet British violet creams) and candied chillies.

It's extremely hard work and the hours are long, but eventually I want to open more shops and develop a website.

I work in collaboration with the Kentish Fare initiative ([kentishfare.co.uk](http://kentishfare.co.uk)) and have been a winner of two of their Taste of Kent awards. And even though I eat at least 10 chocolate truffles every day, I don't put on weight. I put it down to lucky genes and the fact that I love what I do. I'm always busy and, anyway, real chocolate isn't fattening. That sounds like a dream or a sales pitch but it really is true, take it from me! ■

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