

YOUNGER & WISER

Sophisticated sourcing and a global perspective informs the future of Lake Champlain Chocolates

By MELISSA PASANEN

Photographed by DARIA BISHOP

IN THE EARLY 1980S, when they owned The Ice House restaurant on the Burlington waterfront, Jim and Anne Lampman began experimenting with the chocolate business. Spurred along by the creations of chef Tad Spurgeon, the couple soon sold their restaurant and devoted themselves to Lake Champlain Chocolates, a business that by 2016 had grown to employ more than 150 people during peak season, with 17,000 square feet of production space, three Vermont shops and sales to about 2,000 stores around the country.

The Lampmans' children, Eric and Ellen, grew up right alongside Lake Champlain Chocolates, working there as teenagers, and both chose to return to Vermont after college to climb the ranks at the company. In July, Eric, now 32, and Ellen Reed, 36, were named president and vice president, respectively. There was no expectation they would inherit the company, nor obligation to work there, each said. "People would always ask me, 'Are you going to take over?'" Eric said. "And I'd say, 'I'm not going to take anything.'" Their father retains the title of CEO and is still very involved in the business, but he recognizes that the baton must be passed: "We need to

“ We need to appeal to the next generation so it's important that this place is run by the next generation. You've got to get that young thinking in there. ”

LEFT TO RIGHT Ellen Reed and Eric Lampman with their parents and company founders, Jim and Anne Lampman. Now in their 30s, the siblings bring new-school dynamics to keep pace with consumer tastes.



THIS PAGE In South Burlington, the making of Blue Bandana bars includes collecting freshly roasted beans and adding sugar to the melangeur. **OPPOSITE, FROM TOP LEFT** A conveyor carries bars to be wrapped, and ultimately savored in front of the fireplace. Pictured ingredients for s'mores are handcrafted graham crackers by Queen of Tarts (Elizabeth Lowe), Lake Champlain Gourmet Vanilla Marshmallows and Blue Bandana chocolate bars.

appeal to the next generation so it's important that this place is run by the next generation. I'm not as quick to pick up on things as I was. You've got to get that young thinking in there."

The most obvious result is a line of single-origin, dark chocolate bars called Blue Bandana, made since 2014 in a dedicated space just north of company headquarters in Burlington. Unlike the truffles and other confections upon which Lake Champlain Chocolates built its reputation, Blue Bandana chocolate is made entirely from scratch with just two ingredients: pure organic sugar and raw cacao beans, sourced directly from farmers in Madagascar, Guatemala, Tanzania and the Dominican Republic. Coaxing smooth, supple chocolate out of fruity cacao beans is a time-consuming, complex process that few American chocolate companies have traditionally undertaken; rather, they buy European-made chocolate in bulk and focus on the confectionery skills of blending, flavoring, filling and forming. With Blue Bandana, Lake Champlain Chocolates dove deeper.

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Beyond the emphasis on craft, the new chocolate bars reflect changes in how many Americans, particularly young consumers, view food. Eric and Ellen's generation are often keenly aware of food-system dynamics and seek to understand what they eat in its cultural, social and environmental context.

They expect to know where their food comes from, who is growing it and how; these sophisticated consumers appreciate unique flavors that come with a story tied to their place of origin. It does not surprise them that the Tanzanian Blue Bandana bar tastes distinctly different from the Guatemalan, that this range from floral to fruity to spicy is expressive of the regions where the cacao is grown.

FROM THE EARLY DAYS of Lake Champlain Chocolates, the Lampmans sourced local butter, cream, maple syrup and honey, but it took a trip in 2009 to visit cacao farmers in the Dominican Republic for Eric to realize, he recalled, "that we really didn't know that much about our main ingredient." He came home and started roasting up tiny batches of cacao beans in his home oven, separating the nibs from their shells using a hair dryer, before grinding them into the paste that would eventually become chocolate. The hair dryer blew cacao pieces all over the room. One day, he said, "I grabbed a blue bandana to put over my nose and mouth." Later, when developing the new line, it struck him that it could work as a name. "It's literal and symbolic," he explained. "It makes you think of something that's American-made, roll-up-your-sleeves."

As American as it may sound, Blue Bandana is also made possible thanks to a very 21st-century global dynamic, Eric explained, gesturing to his smartphone. "Barriers have been destroyed through technology, and the balance of power has changed," he said. "It's not all

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controlled by big [cacao] brokers anymore. We can cut out the middleman. I can dial up a farmer in Guatemala. I can follow him on Instagram," he continued. "For my sister and me, this opened up a new sense of how we could think globally and act globally." Even though Blue Bandana remains less than 10 percent of the company's business, the line has had broader impact, Ellen said, on her behind-the-scenes work of ingredient sourcing: "It has brought us more understanding of the supply chain overall. We know we can know more now. It inspires us to do better." Over the last several years, Ellen led a successful project to obtain a third-party certification called Fair for Life. Under the arrangement, the company submits to regular audits on all of its sourcing relationships as well as working conditions for employees in Vermont.

Her role on the back end, Ellen said, complements the upfront work of her brother and father. "It gives us each our own space," she said. "We don't agree all the time, but you learn to pick your battles." Eric added, "We challenge each other, but we don't yell and scream."

Jim acknowledged that he and Anne have been approached by companies and investors who would have paid handsomely for Lake Champlain Chocolates, but "Who knows what they'd do with it?" he said, noting that many valued management and production team members have been with the company for decades. Sitting in his office with photos of his children and grandchildren on the wall, he said, "It makes me happy Eric and Ellen can stay here and earn a really respectable living in Vermont." The family is close-knit and spends time together outside of work, Jim said; business is never discussed. Even so, he reflected, "My relationship with my children has changed. It's not a negative, but different. They're not just your kids anymore." 🍌

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