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Totally new' Cocolat savours success



Cocolat is putting together a new crepe menu to die for, really nice flavor combinations such as duck with orange sauce, chicken with sun-dried tomatoes, pine nuts, ricotta cheese and many more.

"The demand for crepes at Rundle Street has soared this past year," says Cocolat entrepreneur, Terena Blanton-Downs.

"We are also in the middle of developing a gourmet fondue product line unlike anything you have ever seen..."

Cocolat is a challenging business involved in manufacturing, distribution, retail and food service. Its signature sweets are made at Balhannah in the Adelaide Hills, where there's a 'cellar door' shop. Another retail boutique is in the Darrivill Farms store in King William St. There are dessert cafes at Adelaide Airport and in Rundle Street.

"Our group reservations have increased dramatically this year for everything from corporate/ networking breakfasts - we cater this in Rundle street prior to the shop opening so the group has privacy - to hens' parties and everything in between!

"Cocolat is having a fabulous year. We offer comfort in times of distress and indulgence in times of excess," Terena says.

"The Cocolat mission statement is 'Creating Great memories! We choose to enhance people's lives by

creating great memories for them if they choose to share part of their day with us. This is our culture."

Terena says the "pebble-lake" effect of good experience drives word-of-mouth promotion.

"We also view ourselves as part of the Adelaide community and give back all we can. We have a company policy to donate product in lieu of cash. While we want to help with our chosen charities we also want Cocolat product for the attendees to experience. We view donations as part of our marketing since it increases public awareness."

Charitable activity also attracts media attention. Cocolat has attracted its fair share.

But while product acceptance and upbeat culture were strengths, Cocolat was lacking business precision.

"Quick growth is a double-edged sword," she says. "With quick growth there are so many balls to keep your eye on, it is very easy to lose sight of some really important ones such as finances, systems, management etc.

"I found it easy to depend on outside professionals to keep me informed on vital parts of Cocolat."

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[Totally new' Cocolat savours success]

Terena says this mistake led to serious problems and 14 months ago she sought help from the new Enterprise Connect program.

"Phil Ransome, a consultant with Enterprise Connect, examined every area of Cocolat which included meeting and working with the staff. He came back to me and the management team with recommendations and how to get the assistance needed to implement the changes recommended.

"The management team at Cocolat is hard working, loyal and just plain great employees. We all jumped in and the tide began to turn very quickly. The Cocolat culture hasn't changed, but the business side of Cocolat is totally new.

"One area that needed lots of attention was the lack of management skills within Cocolat. In many industries today a manager is someone who started at the bottom and worked up. You couldn't ask for a more loyal and dedicated staff, but with all being internally promoted some vital management skills are lacking.

Terena now has 10 staff working on their Retail Management Diploma with training organization, True North.

"We are in the pilot program for a Retail Management Diploma sponsored by the Government. By the end of this financial year every Cocolat manager will be a world-class manager, trained in how to train their staff.

"Our goal is for every Cocolat staff member to go through this course. Paul Berry from True North has designed the training program for Cocolat. It's not an off-the-shelf generic training, but a 'How to be a successful Cocolat Manager' training.

"This isn't a lesson I learned this year but have always known: ALWAYS be upfront and honest with people. We experienced financial troubles that were pretty upsetting. Instead of hanging our head and denying what was happening we worked with our creditors and explained our situation, including the ATO. Personally I feel the ATO gets a bad rap. They respect companies being proactive and honest with them.

"I could write a book on this past year. It has been an amazing experience that has really developed and sharpened my management skills."

Terena prefers to call business barriers "obstacles". Getting around them often leads to opportunity.

"We are an optimistic bunch that never ever gives up," she says. "For now we will continue down the path of becoming a world-class business.

"We don't take orders online, but we have loads of cake orders, etc, as a direct result of our webpage. They simply call the shop and order on the phone. Online ordering is something I hope to spend time on this year. I would like to offer online ordering for local and interstate customers.

"We will continue striving to ensure we reach our mission every time with every customer, Creating Great Memories."

"We will continue developing our systems and procedures, we will continue strengthening our financial structure and position and we will continue developing our staff.

"Our goal is to have a rock solid foundation by the end of 2009, which will open up lots of opportunities in 2010. Stay Posted!"



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