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## WILSON WOMEN TURN FRIENDSHIP INTO A PARTNERSHIP MADE IN 'HEAVEN'

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**Illustration:** Photos by Charles Lewis/Buffalo News

Darlene Alvers, left, and Christine DeLuca are partners in chocolate. The two women own *All That Chocolate*, a home business in the Town of Wilson that offers specialty chocolates and confections and ships orders across the country.

Making quality chocolate requires melting high-grade raw chocolate in a special machine used to heat the chocolate to the correct temperature, according to Darlene Alvers, shown here using a candy system that melts and tempers the chocolate before pouring it into a mold.  
WILSON

Is it a heavenly mix or a match made in heaven?

Two Wilson women turned a recipe for cereal, nuts, pretzels and white chocolate into a signature treat called "Heavenly Mix," a treat that has become part of a recipe for business success.

Darlene Alvers and Christine DeLuca met when their sons, Nick Alvers and Justin DeLuca, were in preschool together. They formed a friendship over coffee. Now their sons are both 16-year-olds, and their friendship has evolved into a business partnership called "*All That Chocolate*."

DeLuca said they both had a similar interest in baking and canning. They first started working together when she asked Alvers to join her in making gingerbread-style chocolate houses for a fund-raiser.

"My whole family loved Darlene's (Heavenly) mix, and it was my husband who suggested we go on the road. He's in marketing. He asked me to make a Christmas order for his customers. It was 250 orders and would be shipped all over the country. But I knew I didn't want to do it myself. So I approached Darlene," she said.

The two jumped right into the idea and in 1997 formed a legal partnership, got licensed and had labels printed.

"It's been eight years, and we've both never tired of eating chocolate -- good chocolate," DeLuca said.

"I only eat good chocolate," said Alvers, echoing her partner.

"We figure if you're going to eat the calories . . ." DeLuca said, letting her partner finish the sentence, "You might as well go for the gusto."

*All That Chocolate* is still a small, family business but now offers a wide variety of chocolate specialty items and baskets for holidays -- including Christmas, Easter and Valentine's Day -- for corporate clients and for special events such as weddings or graduations.

Heavenly Mix is still a big part of that mix.

"It's one of our biggest draws and goes into every basket. It also looks pretty at the holidays," DeLuca said.

The business outgrew DeLuca's basement/kitchen, and the method of tempering chocolate on the stove top.

Alvers said the melting and tempering method and grade of chocolate used is one of the most important things they learned in creating a high-quality chocolate product.

They moved next door into the much larger basement of DeLuca's parents and made their first purchase: a tiny, 1-pound candy machine. But they found they still spent a lot of time filling and refilling.

Pulling the old machine out of the closet, Alvers wondered how they ever worked with such a small machine.

They soon had enough profit to move up to a used 1988 chocolate system (that both melts and tempers the chocolate) that gave them an 80-pound yield of homemade chocolate in an eight-hour period. They more recently purchased their first new chocolate system that yields 240 pounds of chocolate in an eight-hour period.

When they say they make "a ton of chocolate," they aren't exaggerating. Using both machines, they made and sold just over 2,000 pounds of chocolate last Christmas, as well as 300 pounds of nuts, 360 pounds of caramel and 500 gift baskets.

"For us it's a lot. We do 90 percent of our business at Christmas," DeLuca said.

Both have relied on family and friends to pitch in, especially when the orders pour in. The two former preschoolers that started it all are often called in to put together boxes, which are often shipped all over the country. They are paid in pizza and, of course, chocolate.

This family business also allows both women to focus on their families. Alvers has two daughters and a son; DeLuca has three sons and a daughter.

"We never wanted to get involved in anything that took us away from our families, so we have adapted this to our lifestyles. Our vision is to grow but keep it limited. We never want to say we can't go to a soccer game. We have worked hard to balance this," DeLuca said.

The two women agreed that they have resisted publicity. They don't advertise, in order to keep things small. Word of mouth from friends and open houses have kept them busy enough.

"We've been together eight years, and we've never had a fight," DeLuca said.

"We share the same values, and we can relate to certain things," Alvers said. "She's my sounding board."

"We've had wonderful mentors. Everyone has helped us," Alvers added.

Recently, they have held a few open houses to let other people taste and buy their products. Neighbor Eva George stopped in last weekend.

"I bought the sponge candy, opened it and told my friends to try some," she said. Less than an hour later, the whole box was gone, and George and her two friends were back to buy more.

A Lockport couple, Sherm and Barb Lyke, read about the local chocolate-makers on their e-mail and came in to support the local business.

"Homemade is always good," said Barb Lyke, who was buying a basket for a special gift.

"We are always giving out free samples, but it comes back to us tenfold," said DeLuca.

Those who would like to order from *All That Chocolate* can view its merchandise and contact it through its Web site, [www.allthatchocolate.com](http://www.allthatchocolate.com), or call 751-6105.

e-mail: [nfischer@buffnews.com](mailto:nfischer@buffnews.com)

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