

# INCIRCLE enrichées

PUBLISHED FOR INCIRCLE MEMBERS · HOLIDAY 2006



VOSGES HAUT-CHOCOLAT



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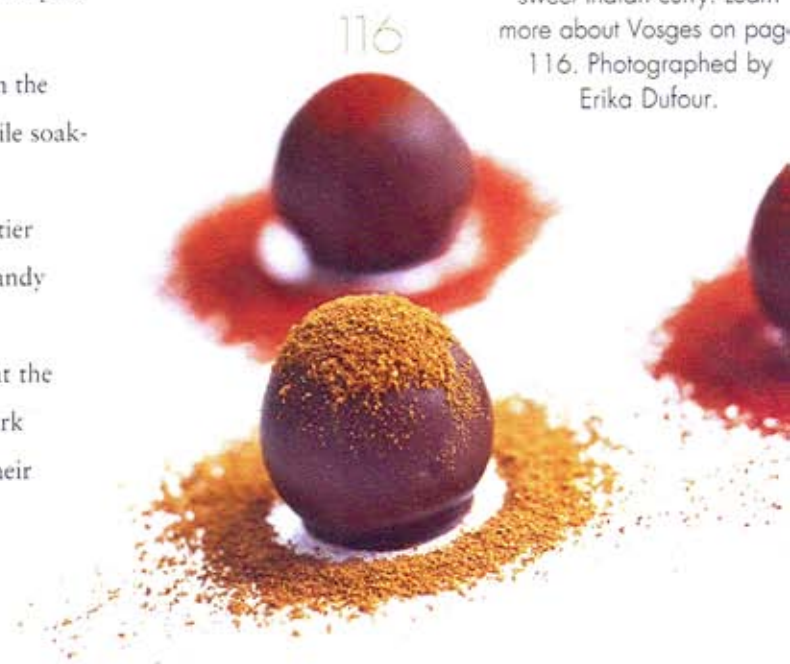


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**ON THE COVER**  
Chocolate making is an adventure at Vosges Haut-Chocolat, where the delectable creations feature ingredients such as Champagne, paprika, and sweet Indian curry. Learn more about Vosges on page 116. Photographed by Erika Dufour.



Making the couture equivalent of chocolate is a "crusade" for Markoff, but she doesn't do it the way she saw it done in France, with lab coats and scientific instruments. A self-proclaimed "messy cook," Markoff advocates a hands-on environment at Vosges.



# Chocolate. Confidential

Vosges  
chocolatier  
**Katrina Markoff**  
shares the secrets  
of her own  
candy land



MOST FOOD FACTORIES ARE ALIKE. AFTER ALL, that's sort of the point of a factory—to standardize the production. While the recipes may vary depending on whether you're watching truffles or candy bars come off the line, the process is the same.

While automating may help Vosges (pronounced *vozh*) Haut-Chocolat meet demand for its high-end chocolates, the factory is not like any other, and founder and CEO Katrina Markoff likes it that way.

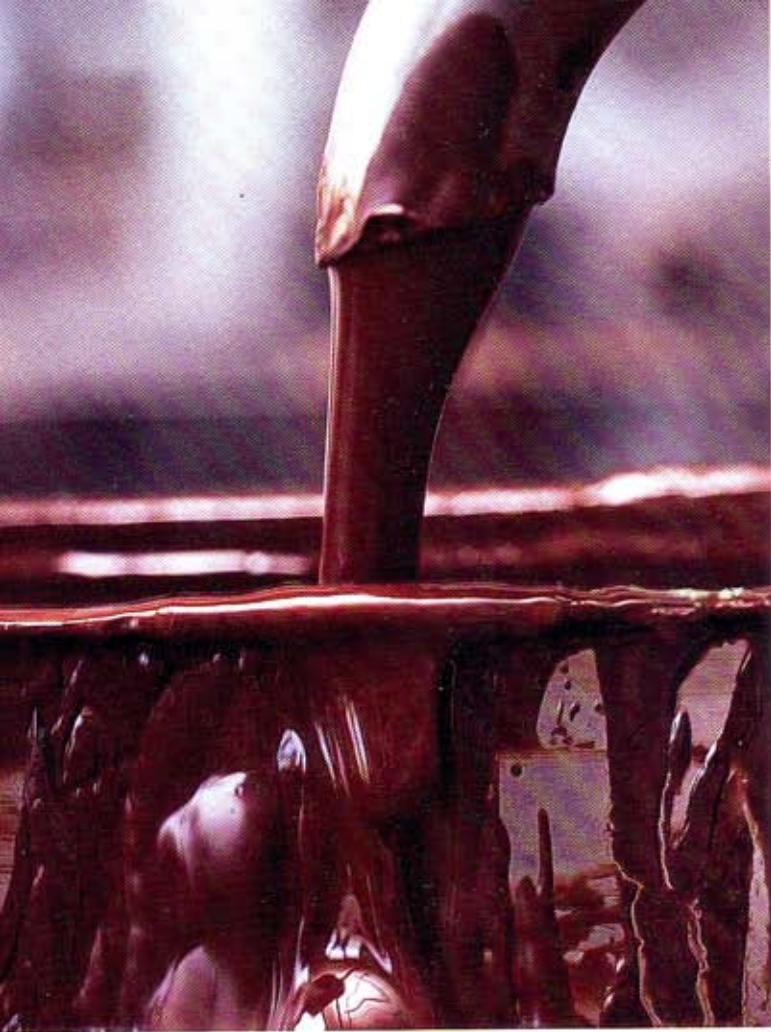
Mere seconds after walking into the Chicago loft that serves as the company's corporate headquarters, warehouse, and factory, even the greenest food reporter would know that this isn't your average factory. There are the expected chocolate smells, the conveyor belts on which tiny truffles and caramels travel, and the copper pots in which batches of flavors are mixed. But the industrial walls are painted with images of cocoa pods in the rich purple color that has become the signature of Vosges' packaging. In the

corporate administrative offices, the exposed ductwork is covered with saris that were used as tablecloths at Markoff's September 2005 wedding. And after making as many as 5,090 candy bites daily, employees can de-stress at a weekly on-site yoga class.

The unique touches aren't limited to the décor. In the nine years since Markoff started the business with a friend, her voice and vision for the brand have become stronger. Schooled at Nashville's Vanderbilt University and then at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris, Markoff started Vosges—named after a chocolate ganache dessert at a restaurant in the Place des Vosges in Paris—because she didn't see any other luxury chocolates on the market that she considered the culinary equivalent of haute couture.

While many entrepreneurs see their involvement wane as the business grows, Markoff is still up to her elbows in chocolate.

She still personally develops the recipes for the new products introduced several times a year, such as 2006's D'Olivia, a



"FOR ME, LUXURY STEMS FROM THE ATELIER, FROM THE CRAFTSMAN. IT IS THE LOVE A PERSON PUTS INTO A PRODUCT. TODAY, LUXURY CAN BE MASS-MARKETED, AND THE VISION, CRAFT, AND CREATIVE PROCESS IS LOST. EVERY PRODUCT I CREATE IS INSPIRED BY AN EXPERIENCE WITH FOOD, MUSIC, CULTURE, AN EMOTION."

combination of kalamata olive and white chocolate that may not sound good, but has the same savory-sweet appeal as the classic chocolate-covered pretzel. But instead of making them in the factory's kitchen, she does her experimenting at home. "I'm a messy cook, almost like a mad scientist. It looks like a tornado struck. I do it from home because that's where my creative energy is," she says.

Markoff started the Vosges line with chocolates that include international ingredients such as sweet Indian curry and Mexican vanilla bean and has now expanded with a new collection that tracks the history of music through chocolate. That Luxe Groove Collection packs 12 truffles tied to their musical roots—Hip Hop is made with Krug Champagne, while Jazz has chicory coffee—in a box filled with Swarovski crystals. The shelves of the headquarters are packed with other exotic ingredients, such as bee pollen and pink Himalayan salt.

But it isn't the price tag or rare ingredients that make a Vosges chocolate a luxury item, Markoff says. "For me, luxury stems from the atelier, from the craftsman. It is the love a person puts into a product. Today, luxury can be mass-marketed, and the

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: There's never any downtime when it comes to making one of the few luxury chocolate brands in the United States. Hand-detailing, such as adding Hungarian paprika and sweet Indian curry to exotic truffles, is part of what makes Vosges Haut-Chocolat taste different than mass-produced sweets. Each Gatsby Cake is hand-decorated, one tiny dot and swag at a time. Many lucky customers are first introduced to Vosges when they receive it as a gift.

vision, craft, and creative process is lost. Every product I create is inspired by an experience with food, music, culture, an emotion."

Walking through the factory in a casual T-shirt and skirt, her long brunette locks in the requisite hair net, Markoff stops to watch an employee hand-wrap and box organic caramels from the company's Wink of the Rabbit Collection. The product takes two days to make and then has a limited shelf life of eight weeks, like most Vosges products. Markoff wants her customers to savor the tastes of her products when they buy them or receive them as a gift, rather than save them for a special occasion.

Markoff's life outside the factory no doubt contributes to the sense of adventure infused into her products. She enjoys riding in Kentucky equestrian competitions and has had

her pilot's license since she was 19 (she opts for a day in a Cessna 172 when she needs some R and R). Making luxury chocolates is a way of "introducing people to new concepts," she says. "Growing up, I learned to appreciate the details in everything. I got into business because I wanted to create something that had meaning beyond a single dimension of taste. I think I do that." ■