

Made in Southwest Florida

— by J.G. Samuels



Ingo and Leslie Wullaert
make life in Bonita Springs
a little sweeter, flavoring it with
chocolates they make by hand.

Products that please, from tip to toe

Southwest Florida is full of treasure, and not all of it is imported. Although not a manufacturing mecca by any means, the area is ripe with impressive products—some edible, some not, but all fit for human consumption in some way. Following are a few businesses that proudly produce unique goods that are made in Southwest Florida.

Wullaert Belgian Chocolates

The point that chocolate maker Ingo Wullaert wants to make is: There is, in fact, good and bad chocolate.

“There are charlatans everywhere,” says the young man, whose Belgian accent is as rich as his chocolates, and those charlatans will sell you a bill of goods, or chocolates, if given half a chance.

He’s not naming names—such as the big name in American chocolate bars—or placing blame, as it’s all about making a product that tastes good to the public. But it’s his hope and dream to educate everyone in Southwest Florida about the values of pure, heavenly chocolate, and he’s doing it one itty-bitty piece at a time from his shop in an industrial center off of Old U.S. 41 in Bonita Springs.

Ingo is a scientist of sorts, always testing new flavors and combinations. If you walk into his workshop while he’s cooking something sweet, you might be handed one and asked, “So, what do you think?”

What’s his secret to making the best chocolate this side of Belgium? He has many, but a key, he says, is “I use heavy cream.” As a result, his pretty little pieces of candy have a shelf life of only about a month, but the quality is worth the short life.

“We do everything ourselves,” says wife Leslie, who along with six-year-old son Jerom are Ingo’s prime taste testers. Well, Leslie more than Jerom, as their child—believe it or not—doesn’t like chocolate. Or is it that he’s just very picky, like his parents?

Ingo admits that he’s particular about his chocolate. He’s even been known to speak at local libraries about ways to depict good and bad chocolate.

He spends hours preparing his mini masterpieces, and upon completion, his artwork is displayed on a dozen or so silver trays for customers to ogle as they enter his place of business.

The sweet, rich aroma that wafts through the warehouse is enough to put ten pounds on your thighs, but alas, the small whiff of heaven is too much to deny. “That’s why there’s a personal trainer next door,” he jokes, and passes another chocolate.

It’s taken practice and years of training in Belgium to become as good as he is at chocolate making.

Three years ago, the Wullaerts and other family members moved to the United States and started a bakery in Port Charlotte. Leslie’s brother is a baker and Ingo is the chocolate maker, so they thought it would be a perfect business marriage. But when some of the clan got homesick and headed back, Ingo and Leslie decided to go it alone here.



Years of training in Belgium—and real cream—make Ingo Wullaert’s chocolates unparalleled in Southwest Florida.

“We didn’t know what the deal was with chocolates here with the heat,” Leslie says. They weren’t sure anyone would even buy chocolate.

They’re finding just the opposite. The wholesale business has led Ingo into local restaurants and even to the shelves of a local fish market, for which he invented a “key lime chocolate.” At his workshop, the chocolates he makes are sold per box.

“I could give them big, fancy names,” Ingo says, but it’s much easier just to call them what they taste like.

And the proof is in the tasting.

“She’s eating all my profits,” Ingo says with a laugh, gesturing to his wife.

Leslie blushes slightly and says, “How you say? They wink at me. They all talk to me.”

Ingo hopes that’s the way each of their customers will feel too.

For more information on Wullaert Belgian Chocolates, call 239/566-9025, visit the business at 1045 Collier Center Way, No. 5, Bonita Springs, or e-mail wullaert@swfla.rr.com.



PHOTOS BY KATHLEEN BLASE

Honey keeps René Curtis Pratt's family sticking together, from her grandfather, who started the business, to daughter Kendall (above center) and grandbaby Lane (above right).

Harold P. Curtis Honey Co.

René Curtis Pratt is a busy bee—maybe because that’s what she deals with on a daily basis.

Her business, Harold P. Curtis Honey Co. in LaBelle, was started by her grandfather fifty years ago, and she’s proudly run it for a good many years. How long, she doesn’t say. “I went to college, and I come back, and I raise bees,” she states in her soft Florida Cracker twang. “They’re interesting,” she explains.

“We have all our own bees within a sixty-mile radius—from Sanibel to Bonita and Clewiston,” she says. Curtis Pratt spends a lot of time on the road keeping up with them.

She’s picky about her honey, and the quality and variety keep her customers coming back. “People say they’ve always come here,” she says. She wants that to continue for another generation.

Curtis Pratt moves with the seasons, because honey comes from different crops throughout the year. The first spring crop is orange blossom honey; in April and May, it’s palmetto; seagrape comes in May and June; mangrove comes in June and July; and in fall, it’s wildflower.

She’s proud of all her honeys, but dotes on a few. “I was raised on palmetto, but my favorite is orange blossom,” she says.

Palmetto honey was always known as medicinal, but it’s not used that way much anymore, Curtis Pratt says. People look for either the high quality orange blossom or the gourmet and specialty kinds of seagrape and mangrove.

The business has changed a lot over the years, especially since Interstate 75 was built.

“Basically, we used to be a seasonal business,” she says. When snowbirds flew

south for the winter, they’d wing their way by her store and purchase their honey stocks for the season. After the interstate was built, it all changed, but not really for the worse, she says. People still travel there, but now they plan the trip or they find her business—which has expanded to offer additional products, such as beeswax candles—online.

Her business is buzzing, but she’s philosophical about it all. “You’re not going get rich off of raising bees,” she says and laughs. “As my son says, people don’t stand in line for a job where you get stung all the time.”

The business is located at 335 Bridge St. in LaBelle. For more information, call 888/531-9097 or e-mail honeymaker@jnth.com. The Web site is <http://curtishoney.hypermart.net/index.html>.

Sand Dollar Sandals

Rusty Kleinheinz is also very familiar with the idea of the family business. He's been running his mother's, Sand Dollar Sandals, for the past two and a half years.

His mother had worn the Naples store's sandals for years before the business went up for sale. "My mother thought, 'Where am I going to buy my sandals now?'" he says, so she took it over.

The amiable Kleinheinz now spends his days making sandals or helping customers. A trio came in while he talked, and he hopped out of a wicker chair to help the woman, her daughter, and granddaughter all find sandals that fit not only their feet but also their personalities.

"We basically do three or four different prints," he says. There are other options too, such as hand-painted designs.

"They'll bring an outfit in and try and match it," says Linda Brown, who considers herself the "Girl Friday" of the business, buying, manufacturing, and choosing the colors for the sandals. "Would you believe I came in here to buy a pair of sandals and ended up with a job?" she says and laughs.

Ladies who know what's afoot in Naples fashion step into Sand Dollar Sandals for some help from Rusty Kleinheinz.

The biggest sellers are pairs with prints of pink flamingos, palm trees, and hibiscus. Large local stores buy the sandals to match store outfits, says Brown, and they are popular with tourists and, of course, local diehards.

Kleinheinz says it's the value that sells his product. "They're extremely well priced," he says, at \$20 to \$35.

"Certain styles we'll make slims and wides," Brown adds. But in order to be a great Southwest Florida business, Kleinheinz says he's got to go beyond that. "Nine times out of ten, we can make the sandal to fit the foot."

Talk about personal service.

For more information, call 800/472-6325, visit the factory showroom at 1826 Trade Center Way, Naples, or log onto www.sanddollarsandals.com.

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