



A sugary aroma and the whirring sound of machinery greet you as you enter the inconspicuous factory in the tiny village of Rode, Somerset. Women wearing white lab coats and baker-boy caps are scuttling about, scooping up velvety ladles of dark, milk, white and pink liquid chocolate from vats, and pouring it into silicone moulds in the shapes of Christmas puddings, reindeer and snowflakes. You can't help but think Gene Wilder might burst through the door at any moment in a purple velvet tailcoat and top hat with an army of Oompa-Loompas, singing a song.

Kerr Dunlop and his daughter, Flo Broughton (she married in 2008), who launched their handmade chocolate company Choc on Choc seven years ago, produce 63,000 of their quirkily designed chocolates a week – from farmyard animals to lipsticks, shoes and handbags – for independent retailers and major stockists including Waitrose and Habitat.

Today they are busy creating the Christmas lines (a process that begins in May and ends in October). The factory will supply Waitrose with five tons of chocolate for the festive season. Claire White, 40, is making chocolate reindeers. Pink noses are created by gently spiralling dyed white chocolate into the mould using what Broughton calls 'a pokey stick' (actually an artist's utensil for use with watercolour paints). The noses are left to set for 10

BREAKING THE MOULD

Sprinkling glitter on Christmas puddings, painting the noses on reindeer – now is the busiest time for a handmade chocolate company in Somerset. By **Georgia Dehn**. Photographs by **Sarah Weal**

Kerr Dunlop (above left) carves a plaster snowflake that will be used to create a new silicone chocolate mould (left)

minutes or so before a layer of milk chocolate is added. White picks up a finished mould and hands it to me. 'You can tell these are ready because it's cool,' she explains. It feels warm to me. So she hands me a mould that is not ready, to demonstrate the difference. It feels the same temperature. To work here you must possess fingers unusually sensitive to heat.

The idea for Choc on Choc first came about in 2002 when Broughton, 31, came home one day to find her father 'messaging about in the kitchen filling rubber moulds in the shape of noughts and crosses with chocolate'.

'There was a whole pile of cooking chocolate in the cupboard, and I thought I should do something creative with it, so I made those moulds,' Dunlop says. 'I was just playing.' Dunlop has always been something of an inventor (in the 1980s he designed the hugely popular hedgehog boot wipers). But it was his daughter, who had recently graduated from a degree course in graphic design, who suggested they work together. 'When I think about it now, there was a gap in the market as people were beginning to love things that weren't mass-market and were handmade in Britain,' she says. But she admits that at the time this was not her thinking. 'We were just two creative people with no jobs.'

The following year, even though at that stage they didn't know how the chocolates would be produced, they took 12 chocolates to a trade show in Birmingham. They were amazed to receive 100 orders from several independent shops and also one from Harrods. 'We had no idea how you actually make chocolate, though,' Dunlop says. 'I thought we'd take the moulds I made to someone else to do it for us, but no one was interested in making a few hundred chocolates for a man and his daughter.'

'I phoned a number of chocolatiers to ask them about the machines and ended up buying one from a man in Liverpool, who showed us how to use it,' he adds. 'But this was seven years ago, and not everyone had websites, so it took a while to find him.' They advertised in the local paper for someone to help in a new chocolate factory. Soon, with the help of a teenager, Stacey Dobson, they were producing the orders from a small outhouse next to the Dunlop family home. 'We were working through the night at that stage,' Broughton says. 'It was a surprise to see how popular the chocolates were, and everything we know now we learnt through just getting on with making them.'

By 2007 the factory had to relocate to bigger premises nearby; a further four machines were bought and the staff increased to 20, most of whom live locally. Broughton has continued to work on the factory floor when she can, despite the logistical side of the business, which she runs, becoming more demanding. Dobson, now 24, still works full-time for Choc on Choc. She is currently sprinkling edible glitter over boxes of chocolate Christmas puddings, before putting on the lids and tying ribbons around them.

The process used to create the chocolates is unique. So much so, in fact, that Dunlop and Broughton are reluctant to talk about it in detail, and have now patented it. It involves layering two



'Everything we know now we learnt through just getting on with making the chocolates'

Above a finished Christmas box, reindeer and a detailed chalet scene. **Below** Flo Broughton

types of chocolate, and Broughton says her staff need 'a steady hand and strong thumb'. Big buyers will often ask how large the volume of an order needs to be before the cost starts to come down, and she has to tell them that the bigger the order, the more hands need to be employed, so in fact it becomes more expensive.

Dunlop and his daughter do not profess to be chocolate connoisseurs, but the time it takes to develop a design and make the moulds means that it would be silly to scrimp on the quality of the chocolate. 'Usually when you see novelty things the chocolate is rubbish,' Dunlop says.



Choc on Choc buys a good-quality Belgian chocolate from one of the leaders in the field.

Across the corridor from the factory is a room known as 'Kerr's shed'. Inside, Dunlop is busy developing moulds for their latest designs. The company has about 150 designs in its range, and from November the production of the Valentine and Easter lines begins. They have introduced a line of polka-dot hearts that come in a 'ready-to-post' package, and there is a buzz of excitement about the new daisies and Easter bunnies.

Dunlop initially uses wood and plaster before making the moulds from silicone. He uses a wide range of tools, from those you would find in a silversmith's workshop to ones you are more likely to see at the dentist. The shed is lined with shelves full of master moulds. After a rummage, he pulls out a 15 x 15cm one of a castle.

When Nicolas Cage bought Midford Castle up the road, he ordered a number of chocolates to be made in the image of it to give to his friends and staff. Dunlop recounts the story of how Cage himself knocked on Choc on Choc's door. Dunlop didn't recognise him, so the actor was given no star treatment. 'If I'd known who he was, I might have charged him more,' Dunlop says laughing. The company has also made bespoke chocolate versions of Sting's house and Highgrove. Something of that scale may take Dunlop up to three weeks to carve, whereas the moulds for the simpler designs – the Christmas puddings, for example – can be developed in a few days.

The success of the company (profits were up 56 per cent this year on last) is down to its charming designs, all lovingly crafted by hand – Broughton says it would be near impossible to automate the production process. Our tour at an end, she is back on the factory floor, eight months pregnant and almost popping out of her lab coat. Her child will surely have fun being introduced to this Willy Wonka world.

chocolateonchocolate.co.uk. Available at Waitrose