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## A good match for the holidays: Hollie's Homegrown and Hofssi Chocolates at Cine Cuvée

By Sophie Braccini



Hollie Lucas-Alcalay, Susan Rossi and Linda Hofmeister set up their holiday store at Cine Cuvée in Orinda. Photo provided

and Lucas-Alcalay noticed that the chocolatiers were business women with the same ethics: looking for organic, flawless production, and delivering what had been promised on the terms that were agreed upon.

The trio also explains that they are in the same economic bracket with similar constraints: their volumes are still small, so selling wholesale does not pencil out. They want to grow but will have to make crucial decisions in terms of investments and more partnerships. Both businesses are also developing online sales, as well as working on fundraising activities where part of the proceeds go to a school or charity.

They decided to look for a retail space to share during the holidays. October through December are three crucial months for both their businesses, generating more than 50 percent of their annual sales. They talked to different landlords and commercial agents, but could not find the space that would combine good foot traffic and affordability. Then one day, while going to the movies, Lucas-Alcalay noticed that the wine bar, Cine Cuvée, next to the Orinda theater, was only open in the evening. The women contacted owner Derek Zemrak, and struck a deal.

Hollie's Homegrown and Hofssi Chocolates now have a storefront through Dec. 23, open from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. in downtown, at 2 Orinda Theatre Square.

It is a bit of work every day to set things up and transform a cozy bar into a gourmet boutique at 10 a.m., then turn the space back into a wine bar by 5 p.m., but the ladies are up to the challenge. Every day, they also come to run the store - something that is a bit of a challenge when running a booming business, since online sales and farmers' markets do not stop during the holidays, and neither do raising families. They all acknowledge that their husbands support them handsomely, with meal prep and management of most of the children's extracurricular activities. Several Saint Mary's students also intern at the boutique. The three businesswomen say that the students enjoy learning the ropes of a small business.

Lucas-Alcalay, Hofmeister and Rossi say that depending on how things go at the holiday boutique they might look for a common permanent space in the future.

At a recent Lamorinda Business Women group meeting, Hollie Lucas-Alcalay participated in a panel discussion about partnerships. For the Moraga entrepreneur who grows and sells her herbs and derivative concoctions, it was a topic she understands well; she recently created a common boutique with Lamorinda chocolatier sisters Susan Hofmeister and Linda Rossi of Hofssi Chocolates in Orinda's downtown Cine Cuvée.

The three women are all mothers of young children, living in Moraga or Orinda and driven by a similar desire to create high quality gourmet products for a demanding market. Lucas-Alcalay has been in business for seven years, growing all kinds of herbs in her garden, drying and packaging them, creating teas, culinary salts, olive oils and herb infused bath and body products that she sells herself in farmers' markets or online.

Hofmeister and Rossi create their chocolates through Cottage Food Operator licenses in their homes. Their range of products include gourmet caramels, toffees, mint meltaways, chocolate covered almonds and the signature gianduja - an Italian concoction mixing chocolate and ground roasted hazelnuts or almonds.

The three women rubbed shoulders at different events, such as the Hacienda de las Flores Holiday Fair,

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