



A NW ORIGINAL  
**FRAN BIGELOW**  
*of Fran's Chocolates*

*Fran Bigelow now oversees a chocolate empire at Fran's Chocolates, but the Seattle native began her career as an accountant, and admits, back then, she didn't know how to cook.*

"Julia Child would come on television, and I started trying all of her recipes," Bigelow recalls. "I'd learn one a week and, oh my gosh, it opened up all kinds of things."

A trip to Paris in 1969 with her husband Peter proved inspirational. Bigelow recalls visiting one particular chocolate shop and "the smells, the flavors—it opened up my senses to what chocolate really was."

As soon as she returned, Bigelow enrolled in cooking classes and later, culinary school, where she apprenticed with a Swiss pastry chef. Baking, with its exact measurements, appealed to Bigelow's love of details, and she found she enjoyed experimenting with recipes. She opened Fran's Patisserie and Chocolate Specialties in 1982.

Fran's Chocolates, as it's called now, has grown considerably over the past 33 years. She started her business focusing on pastries and cakes, but now specializes in an array of caramels, truffles, bars, hot chocolate, and chocolate-covered fruit and nuts. Both of her children, Andrina (Fran's CEO) and Dylan,

have joined the company. The company has achieved nationwide wholesale distributing, including sales at every Whole Foods Market store throughout the country.

Fran's Chocolates has also caught the attention of President Barack Obama, who discovered Fran's on the campaign trail. White House guests now receive a box of Fran's salted caramels in a box stamped with the Presidential Seal.

"It's amazing to me that I'm still doing this after 33 years. I don't know what I was thinking when I started, but I didn't think it would turn out like this," Bigelow says with a note of her trademark *joie de vivre* in her voice. "It's been a wonderful journey."

The company, last fall, added a 30,000-square-foot production facility and retail store in the former old Seattle Brewing and Malting Co. in the city's Georgetown neighborhood. The opening marked the company's fourth retail shop, and the first where customers can watch the products being made.

Though much has changed for Fran's Chocolates, plenty has

remained consistent. The company still creates each confection by hand, from tempering to dipping to decorating. "It is precision work," Bigelow says. "We believe in doing everything in small batches to keep the flavor right, the quality right."

Many of Fran's employees have worked with her for decades, so her company truly feels like a family, she says. "A handful of people have been here over 20 years, and a lot between 10 and 15. It makes a real difference. You trust them and they enjoy their work and become true artisans." That low turnover also means consistency when it comes to the product; new employees are able to learn from seasoned veterans who know the product well.

Though the company does not make its own chocolate from scratch, they buy from manufacturers that have meticulously and ethically sourced high-quality beans. Dylan Bigelow, Fran's Director of Chocolate, has worked closely with Valrhona to develop a dark chocolate blend exclusive to Fran's.

"It's to his specifications," Bigelow says. "We get a long finish to the chocolate with a wonderful fruit flavor." Fran's milk chocolate blend includes Swiss milk that makes for a richer product. Fran's Chocolates sources its other ingredients close to home, opting for organic ingredients when possible.

"The guiding philosophy has always been a commitment to quality and the feeling that if we use the best ingredients we can find, and take great care to keep our quality up, we can continue to grow and prosper," Bigelow says. "So much of our success has been word of mouth, with customers giving gifts to other customers. And when they try our chocolate, they're hooked." **TM**

