

# WHERE CHOCOLATE MEETS **CRAFT** AND **CULTURE**

By **Vivien Bui**

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**W**endy Lieu, owner and founder of Socola Chocolatier, was inspired not in a restaurant or in a kitchen, but by a chocolate shop right next to her parents' nail salon, where she worked as a high school student. On her breaks, Wendy would go next door and try samples of the chocolates and confections. She loved the taste and it piqued her interest – what if she could try making these at home?

Trying her hand with a recipe from Gourmet Magazine, she created her first truffle and was thrust into the world of fine chocolate. The desire to taste evolved into a desire to create, and Socola was born when Wendy was only 19. With her sister Susan, she began making truffles and selling them in 2001 at the Santa Rosa downtown farmer's market as Socola, meaning "chocolate" in Vietnamese. In 2014, they opened a storefront in San Francisco. In 2024, they opened another one at the San Francisco International Airport, where Wendy's family had arrived as immigrants some decades before.

Through the slow growth of her small business, Wendy got one question again and again: "What's Vietnamese about Socola?"

While the name was a tie to her heritage, Socola's flavors started off as classic Western flavors: dark chocolate, raspberry, caramel. Over the years, she added a couple of Vietnamese flavors that lingered near the middle of the roster in popularity.

Then, the pandemic hit. Overnight, her competition went from Bay Area chocolatiers to every single chocolatier that would ship domestically. Desperate for a way to stand out, she decided to bet on her heritage; Socola would become the Vietnamese chocolatier.

She created the Little Saigon Box, a collection of nine flavors inspired by a

Vietnamese four-course meal. From Southeast Asian fruits to pho to Vietnamese coffee and cognac, it was a love letter to her motherland – one that instantly resonated with her community. Orders flooded in from Vietnamese people all over the country yearning for a taste of community, curious for how it would taste in the form of chocolate.





It turns out, developing those flavors and pairing them with the right chocolate is no simple task. Some of Socola's flavor inspiration comes from the team's favorite nostalgic treats or from Wendy's travels. If it's particularly niche, there might not be an existing recipe to reference.

When Wendy wanted to incorporate durian into her suite of flavors, she had to consider flavor, color and texture. Moreover, no one had ever made a durian truffle before – but *Chocolate & Confections* by Peter Greweling did have a recipe for a truffle using whipped crème fraiche, which was a similar consistency to durian. And when she was developing a durian chocolate bar, she tried several Guittard products. Just as Goldilocks might have discovered, white chocolate was too sweet when paired with the fruit and dark chocolate overpowered it, but the 38% cacao Soleil D'Or milk chocolate had a bold

chocolate flavor and caramel notes that made the fragrant durian flavors sing.

Wendy has been using Guittard chocolate for over 15 years – in part because of how much they have in common. They're both family-owned brands and local to the Bay Area, allowing Socola to minimize its carbon footprint from chocolate delivery. Most important, she likes the fluidity and taste – consistent and not too fruity, tasting great on its own without hogging the limelight when another flavor enters the mix. Four different products from Guittard Couverture show up in Socola's products, such as:

- The Passion Fruit Truffle – a white chocolate ganache made with passion fruit puree and real vanilla bean, 31% Crème Française, a French-style white chocolate with a sweet fresh cream flavor, nutty undertones and a hint of citrus that pairs well with the passion fruit.

- The Ca Phe Sua Truffle – inspired by Vietnamese coffee, made with deep espresso and 61% Lever du Soleil, a warm fragrant chocolate leading with a light spicy note, followed by a ripe cherry and raising flavors, ending in a smooth chocolate finish.
- The Pho Truffle – Found exclusively in the Little Saigon Box, it's flavored with several pho spices steeped into the cream used to make the ganache and relies on the 72% Coucher du Soleil to be the perfect base – dark, rich, and full-bodied, while allowing the spices to shine. The 72% cacao dark chocolate is also what Wendy uses to enrobe all of her truffles – her secret to keeping things “not too sweet.”
- The Toasted Coconut Black Sesame Bar is a milk chocolate bar made with 38% Soleil d’Or, a milk chocolate with notes of caramel, cinnamon, dairy and a spicy finish that complements the nutty flavors of toasted coconut and black sesame paste.

To help you pick the right chocolate product for your confection, Wendy has put together a list of tips to help you get started.

## Wendy Lieu’s Tips On Selecting A Chocolate Product:

When we are selecting a base chocolate to go with flavors that we are trying to highlight, I think about the following things:

- Balance: Making sure that the chocolate provides a vehicle for the flavors we are trying to highlight; we do not want it to overpower the flavor.
- Complements: What chocolate base (white, milk, or dark) complements and enhances the flavor?
- Visual: Does using a white chocolate enhance the beauty of the chocolate? For example, matcha in white chocolate showcases the green, while dark chocolate masks the color.

- Taste: It must be balanced and not too sweet! We tend to lean heavier into dark and have the sweetness be on the lighter side. Sometimes we have to try with all three to see what tastes best.

Now put it into practice. For the Passion Fruit Truffle, I wanted to highlight the tartness of the passion fruit while balancing it with an appropriate amount of sweetness. In this case, I could have used milk or white chocolate, but preferred to use white chocolate so the natural color could shine through. I added vanilla bean to create a fragrant vanilla taste and so it could resemble passion fruit seeds.

*Photos by Conor Hagen*

