



Just HEAVENLY

Forget climbing a stairway to heaven. You can achieve a similar bliss while still on earth with the sweet, chocolaty goodness of Heavenly Balls, a candy being made by one of Montgomery's favorite citizens, Laurie Weil.

BY HENRIETTA MACGUIRE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KRIS KENDRICK

Laurie Weil could be the little sister of Alexander the Great: constantly looking for new worlds to conquer. Since she's brought supportive comfort to every non-profit organization in the city there was only one thing left to do: provide edible comfort to the rest of us. Chocolates, white, milk and dark with a filling straight from paradise—the Heavenly Balls as her mother christened them.

Weil was asked the obvious first question: Is this a real business or are you just having fun? "It's a real business. This kind of enterprise is too expensive just to fool around with," she said. "According to my business plan, it will be three years before I break even, much less make a profit."

Weil is now producing these Heavenly Balls under her business, named Turtle Tree Treats. The "heavenly" taste of Heavenly Balls comes from the ancient Jewish recipe on which the candy is based, and the origins of the business name are as apropos as the moniker Heavenly Balls. "I love turtles because they're hard on the outside and soft on the inside. And besides, they stick their neck out when

they're trying to do something. Like me," Weil said. "And then I love trees, so they went together. But the name of a business has to reflect what the business does, so since mine is candy, treats had to be added, Turtle Tree Treats. Anyway, I enjoy alliteration."

Last year when Weil was doing research and development with her Heavenly Balls, the enterprise became for a time a family affair. Her husband, a heart specialist, would come home from operating all day, put on an apron and started chopping to cut up the dried fruits and nuts for the fillings. Weil herself once worked 17 hours without stopping, frantically trying to get the first batch ready in order to meet a deadline. Later, her sister-in-law and daughter-in-law would travel with her to sell the product or to go around picking up the boxes and ribbons for packing and shipping.

In the earliest stages of development, she spent a year trying to find a place with a professional kitchen that would not require too much overhauling and modernizing. But every spot was either too expensive or would demand extensive rebuilding. And then came



the brilliant idea. She contacted Priester's Pecans right down the road in Fort Deposit, a successful nut and candy enterprise whose values were like those of Weil herself. Miraculously everything clicked. Under her hawk-eyed guidance, with checking and rechecking endless times, Priester's is now following her recipes and techniques. They are doing the huffing and puffing of manufacturing, packing and shipping the Heavenly Balls. This frees Weil to spend time marketing the product.

She pointed to a key factor of the small business world. "At the level where I'm working, our project is about two main things: providing a service and developing relationships," Weil said. "You can only do that with a small business. For example, if you're dealing with Wal-Mart, often you won't get either service or a relationship because they're so enormous they can't be bothered. But the little guy at my stage is dealing on an intensely personal basis, where relationships are everything."

One of the aspects of small business that fascinates Weil is the limitless number of new people and subjects you're forced to learn about. For example, the size of the printing on the boxes in which the candy is packed. Who would have thought that the font size is important? But it is. Then, how to tie ribbons around the boxes,

how to make the chocolates have a snap when you bite into them, where to find the ingredients for the inside of the Balls, what the requirements are of the Department of Public Health in any business concerning food. The ramifications are endless, and the secret of it all is networking: That's the way to get information that will save you time and energy.

"The Heavenly Balls are chocolate on the outside," said Weil, "but the insides are a very special form of dried fruits and nuts. The highest quality available; the fruit is flown in from California, huge apricots, dates, apples and pineapples.

Since these are so superior, I don't have to use flour or sugar to hold the ingredients together. This cuts down on calories so nobody has to worry about getting fat or suffering from cholesterol. I don't want to contribute to the country's obesity problem."

Many components of the business world have surprised her, including how often successful people will go out of their way to help someone who's starting a venture. "They'll give you advice, tell you where to find information about goods and services, make suggestions, keep you informed and be encouraging," she said. "Maybe they're seeing in you a mirror of their own early efforts. Or maybe they're so secure they aren't afraid of competition and seem to feel that there's always room at the top. I'm really grateful for all the support I've received along the way."

For the present, the Heavenly Balls are sold at Richardson's Pharmacy in Old Cloverdale, at Peppertree Steaks 'N Wines and at about eight other places around the city. You can also find them at many stores throughout Alabama and in Nashville and Atlanta.

A single taste proves the accuracy of the candy's lofty name. After the first bite into a Heavenly Ball you are lifted up to pure, rarified bliss. It is, well, heavenly. **ML**