

Kristi Echols-Preston

Taking the Risks Worth Taking

As a biologist turned trained chocolatier, Kristi Echols-Preston knows something about taking chances. The owner of Boise's gourmet chocolate shop, The Chocolat Bar, says that she focuses less on traditional notions of success and focuses instead on embracing change. That attitude has landed Kristi (and her caramels!) a spot on the "Top 50 Chocolatiers in America" list and helped her build one of the most recognized brands in the Treasure Valley.

Childhood Risk Taking

Kristi learned to embrace change early on in life. Her father worked for the railroad, and so her family moved often. Born in Utah, by age three Kristi had already moved from Colorado to Missouri, and finally Chicago. She spent her early teenage years caring for her mother who was battling cancer. She died when Kristi was fourteen, and Kristi moved out of the house shortly after. "My dad remarried, and his new wife and I did not get along. My dad basically put me in a hotel. I was living in this hotel, going to work. I didn't have a driver's license yet. I would have the guy pick me up

to teach me how to drive. And I would drive myself to work."

When asked what inspired her to face hardships head-on and choose the path of self-sufficiency and discipline, she pauses and laughs, "Gosh, I don't know. Stubbornness? It was just survival. I didn't want to succumb to the things that can happen to a 15-year-old on her own."

She's quick to acknowledge that her teenage years and early independence shaped the way she approached life as an adult. "Through that process, I was determined to show them that I'm not going to fail; I'm not going to fall. And it could really happen to a young woman at 15 years old in a big city. It built up my strength and my determination to face my fears and be open to change. I am more of a risk taker because of that experience."

One of her first big risks was going away to college. While in high school, Kristi visited a friend in Prescott, Arizona. Kristi fell in love with Prescott and the college. She soon enrolled. The college was expe-

riential, focused on hands-on learning rather than classroom lectures. "It was such an amazing experience. Before that, I had only thought of survival. After the visit, I began to think about a profession."

That college experience set her on a path to a career in wildlife, first in New York's Hudson Valley and ultimately in Santa Fe, New Mexico. A conservation biologist for the Nature Conservancy, she worked to protect habitat for threatened and endangered species, all the while raising her two boys Alex and Maxx, as a single mom.

Ten years later, the Nature Conservancy restructured. By that time, Kristi had remarried, and her boys were out of the house. Faced with a choice to relocate Wyoming or Colorado, she chose instead to rethink and start a new chapter. That's where chocolate came in.

She had always had a



love for cooking, but it never seemed like the right time. Until it was. "I took a class with co-owners of a new chocolate shop in Santa Fe. I was supposed to be there just a couple of hours, but I started making the chocolate with them, and we were talking about chocolate. The next thing I know I had been there all day."

As Kristi was ready to head home, the co-owners asked if Kristi wanted to work with them. Kristi agreed immediately. It was the perfect opportunity for her to find out if she wanted chocolate to be her next chapter.

"I would go into the shop, and one of the owners would say 'Ok, we're going to make caramels today. Grab a handful of salt....' And I would look at him and say, 'wait a second. Look at your hand and look at my hand. Your batch of caramel and my batch of caramel are going to taste totally different!' From that day on, I was in charge of standardizing all the recipes."

After a few years, Kristi and her husband, Chris, decided they wanted to move to Boise. By 2004, Kristi and Chris relocated and opened their own shop. Kristi says, "I don't think that Chris and I had a clue what we were getting in to. Our new store was 800 square feet, all the equipment was used, and we did all the work ourselves. We didn't know Boise, we didn't know the community and we had never started our own business before. We

just jumped off the cliff and did it."

Embracing Evolution

"I chose the name The Chocolat Bar so that the store could evolve into different things. I could picture a time when we could serve chocolate and add a wine bar or hot drinks. We would have a relaxed environment with really comfortable seating area."

As Kristi predicted, their product offering evolved quickly. Today, the Chocolat Bar has a core offering of chocolates, including their famous caramels, but Kristi is experimenting all the time to add new treats. She tests with new chocolates that she likes and leaves it to

her customers to tell her what's best. "That's part of the fun of it. I experiment and see what sticks." She recalls, "Coming from Santa Fe, we were used to making Red Chili Bark, Green Chili Bark and then Christmas Bark. It's everywhere in New Mexico, but I wasn't sure how it would be received in Boise. Turned out that people really like it, and so we kept it. One time I made Black Walnut Clusters. I loved them, but customers didn't love them enough to keep them in the case."

Her inspiration comes almost around the clock. "I'll be driving in the car, and I'll have an idea out of the blue. I'll call Chris and say 'Write this down; it's a new recipe.' Or I'll be at a restaurant eating a dish or looking

at a recipe for fish, and I'll see an ingredient that piques my interest. I'll wonder how that would be in chocolate and then I'll go play with it and figure it out."

As the products are ever-changing, the ingredients change too. Kristi works with a large community of vetted, specialized vendors. She sources organic pecans from Northern New Mexico and pistachios from Southern New

Mexico. She buys her almonds from a specific location in California. Her chocolate, too, is from a vetted producer, purchased at a minimum of 5,000 pounds per order. Dealing with such massive quantities brings challenges.

Kristi smiles as she tells a story about an averted crisis. "So, one summer, Chris was out of town, and the air conditioning went out. It was August, nearly 110 degrees. One of the boys had a friend over. Those boys helped me move thousands of pounds of chocolate to a refrigerated basement of a deli owner I knew." She laughs, "I think I lost one tray of finished chocolates...it was like Salvador Dali, with melted chocolate over the edge of the tray. But it's when you make endless trips carrying chocolate down the stairs to a basement when you start to really understand how much 5,000 pounds is!"

"Kristi focuses less on traditional notions of success and focuses instead on embracing change."

Kristi has reaped the benefits of approaching her business with flexibility and openness. “Initially, one of the hardest things was spreading the word about The Chocolat Bar. We would have people from Meridian come into the shop and say ‘Oh my gosh, I never knew you existed!’ That really bothered me at first. I couldn’t figure out how to improve our recognition, apart from advertising which didn’t seem very practical. Then, it finally hit us that it’s okay, maybe even a good thing that people didn’t know us. There are still so many customers out there, we have that much opportunity to grow. That realization helped me move from frustration to excitement.” Kristi and Chris built name recognition over time by often donating to area organizations and creating a following at the Boise Farmer’s Market. Today, The Chocolat Bar’s brand and name recognition are one of its best attributes.

Kristi has evolved as an owner, too. She and Chris both brought their own strengths to the business, but they didn’t always know what those strengths were until they started working together. “I pay much more attention to detail. I am a sensory person, an

observer, always paying attention to what I see, hear, taste. Chris doesn’t, but he’s great at helping us scale and develop processes to make things more efficient. It took us a while to discover it, but our strengths are complementary. He is perfect for the back of the house functions, and I thrive in the front of the house. It works for us.”

When asked what advice she would give to others contemplating a business venture with a spouse, Kristi says, “It can be awesome, but you have to really like the person. Not just love them, but like them. You have to be able to spend 24/7 with them because at the end of the day you’re going to go home. If you’re angry about

what happened at work, then the rest of your evening is going to be painful.”

Knowing Your Limits

“I’m not afraid of change, and I’m a risk taker within rea-

son. I’m not a fool, but I will try something if I feel like it’s within my ethics and integrity. We started off small, our investment was manageable. We didn’t over-leverage ourselves. We did all math, and we were never afraid of losing everything. So, I guess the way I looked at it when he started this is that we started out small our investment was minimal.”

Some entrepreneurs start a business terrified of the “what-ifs” while others start a new venture with the intuitive knowledge that they will be successful. Neither was true for Kristi. “I guess I had this vision, and I knew there wasn’t anything else like it in Boise. It’s not that I knew it would succeed, but I figured the worst that

can happen is we will have to close it up.”

The worst never happened. They discovered that Chris had the attention to detail that is needed to make delicious chocolate. And Kristi and Chris liked working together in the shop. It was a perfect fit and made the venture more of an exciting adventure rather than a scary business venture.

Success came eventually, but it wasn’t immediate. Kristi remembers being in the small shop with the music on, washing dishes or dancing with Chris. “Next thing you know, I would turn around, and there was a man with his son standing there. It has been a couple hours since we had a customer and I didn’t even realize they were there!”

Although it was a couple of years before the shop was consistently making a profit, they always had enough in sales to pay the rent. “I figured as long as we were breaking even, we were doing ok.”

After opening The Chocolat Bar in Boise, Kristi attended the Culinary Institute to sharpen her training as a chocolatier. “It was an awesome experience, but it was also frustrating. I learned about many new techniques. There were so many other products I would love to create, but we didn’t have space. It just wasn’t realistic for us back then.”

Over time, the business had outgrown their small space but their decision to move was a complicated one. While the

business was thriving, Kristi and Chris faced challenges in other areas of their lives. Kristi had only recently finished her year-long chemo-treatment for colon cancer. She was slowly regaining her strength and sense of taste, but wasn’t sure if she would ever fully recover. She wondered how they could keep the business running if she didn’t.

With so many uncertainties, it was risky to move to a new location. However, Kristi and Chris saw the building on Bannock Street, they decided to take a chance. The new space was perfect; they could picture it as the shop’s new home. Eventually, Kristi’s palate and energy returned to pre-treatment levels. In hindsight, Kristi wished they had gone with an even more square footage, but at the time it felt like a little more risk than they were comfortable with.

Bringing Your Whole Self to the Business

Many business owners have the unique ability to create something that is a reflection of themselves. Kristi has molded The Chocolat Bar into a company whose values reflect her own. She recalls a story early on: one of her first employees, Mary, had just had a baby. Mary brought her baby to the shop as she worked. Kristi smiles, “She would always have her in a sling, or she’d be in the swing. I loved it. I remember that time in my own life when I was a young woman with children, trying to support myself and my kids. It was tough to find a job that offered flexibility. It was important to me that The Chocolat Bar provided as much flexibility as possible. I wanted Mary and all

of my employees to feel like they could do it—they could be with their children and make a living. It worked for Mary, and it was enjoyable for me to have this little baby there all the time. It was exactly what I wanted.”

As a business owner, Kristi has built upon skills that she cultivated earlier in her career. She takes the lead on all business development and manages all the details of corporate orders. She leans heavily on her project management experience from her days at the Nature Conservancy. “At the Conservancy, I had to manage all these different preserves and all the components that go along with that: the legal part, the stewardship. It was incredibly complex, but a great experience that prepared me for the nature of this business. Customers’ orders are changing all the time, and I have so many different employees working on each request, that fulfillment needs to be carefully orchestrated.”

She also credits her training as a biologist. “I’m naturally an observer, but my training early in my career really helped with that. As a biologist, I spent six months in the wilderness monitoring a bald eagle nest. I spent three months in the desert in different parts of time studying different things. It trained me to pay attention to the details, to watch the subtleties. It gave me the power to notice and refine all aspects of my product and observe my customers, too.”

Everything down to the product packaging is a reflection of Kristi and her values. She avoids the fancy packaging and

ornate boxes often found in specialty chocolate shops. Instead, Kristi has taken a different approach. She chose simple, elegant packaging. Why? Three reasons, she explains: 1) Her product can stand on its own. Kristi wants people to love her caramels for the caramel, not the box it came in. 2) She wants to keep her prices competitive so as many people as possible can enjoy her treats. 3) Although she’s a chocolatier now, she’s still a conservationist. “I just can’t justify using all those dyes and plastics knowing it will be tossed aside and thrown away. I want my business to reflect the way I live myself, which is to take care of the earth and live simply and conserve energy and resources.”

Defining Success

Some business owners experience a moment where they know they have something. Kristi doesn’t recall having that kind of ah-ha moment, but she says she never needed it. She has never defined success according to profit margins or revenue. She says, “I am reminded that I am successful when I have someone come into the shop and say ‘Oh my god, that is so good.’ When people make those ‘Mmmmm’ yummy noises, I know that I have done something right. It warms my heart.”