

THE WAY WE WERE

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RESIDENT COMMUNITY NEWS

Phyllis Geiger

"Everything in life is sweetened by risk." That's the epitaph beneath the photo of Phyllis Geiger in The Williston Northampton School's 1965 yearbook. How prophetic that statement turned out to be. Nearly two decades later, Phyllis risked everything she had and successfully translated the European art of hand tempering chocolate into an American neighborhood experience that first went public in San Marco and has since expanded throughout Florida and up into Georgia and Alabama.

Phyllis was born in Westchester, New York and grew up with her elder sister, Izzi, in Darien, Connecticut. They moved there with their father and his new wife after their mother had passed away from breast cancer when the girls were only 5 and 8 years old. Along with their luggage, the sisters carried with them the prayers their mother had recited with them every night, the psalm she had helped them commit to memory, her sense of humor, and her Irish resiliency.

In Darien, Phyllis held the title of first female lifeguard at Pear Tree Point Beach. At 15, she moved to Massachusetts to board at Williston where she was known to be a socialite and somewhat of a prankster. From there, she attended college before marrying and becoming a mom.

Phyllis's first husband worked for Proctor and Gamble. "There's a reason it's called P&G. It's pack and go," she said. "We moved 12 times in 13 years." There were three stays in Cincinnati, Ohio near corporate headquarters, one for each time her husband had earned a promotion. Phyllis recounted how each time she had just furnished and decorated a new home, they'd have to move again.

In the late 1970s, with two young children, Peter and Brooke, the family was transferred to Kansas City, Missouri. In the midst of motherhood and housewifery, Phyllis began working as an apprentice at a local high-end company called Kron, where she was trained in the European method of making chocolate. "I fell in love with it," she said. She went to Switzerland several times and had asked her chocolatier trainer what the equivalent would be in the United States. "There is nothing American like this," he told Phyllis. A dream dawned.

In the early 1980s, the family of four was transferred from Kansas City to Jacksonville. They lived in Ponte Vedra, at first, and then Atlantic Beach for a bit. And though Phyllis liked it near the shore, she kept asking people, "Where would be the center of Jacksonville to start a business?" She had a sweet vision in mind and a written plan in hand, but she was new in town and unfamiliar with the lay of the land. Residents in the know pointed her toward San Marco. Phyllis didn't know where that was but hoped it wasn't at the beach. She and her children wanted solid ground and fertile soil to plant some roots. So, Phyllis ventured off to find San Marco. "It was obviously the right place. Totally!" she said.

Forty years ago, San Marco wasn't like it is today. "Now it's very cosmopolitan, hip, and trendy. But back then, it was a different story," Phyllis said. Investors were buying property and encouraging new businesses to come. There was a lot of renovation going on in the neighborhood.

That was a busy time for Phyllis, too. In a single week in 1983, her father re-married, she divorced, and she opened a chocolate shop at 1970 San Marco Boulevard. She named it Peterbrooke Chocolatier, for both of her children.

The savor that Peterbrooke is known for is a specific blend of dark, milk, and white chocolates that Phyllis had adopted from Nestlé in Switzerland and adapted for the US market. "Tastes are regional," Phyllis had known all along. Northerners prefer dark. Southerners have sweet palates. She translated what she had been taught into an American product. "I had this idea and just went forward with it," she said.

In the beginning, Phyllis would travel back and forth every morning from the beach house to the shop and tend to the daily routine, which started with dipping berries. But that commute changed not long afterwards. "Divorce papers landed in the chocolate," she said.

Phyllis bought a house in San Marco on Alexandria Place to live in with the children closer to her business, and their father bought a house nearby on Sorrento Road. Peter



Phyllis Geiger



< Phyllis, Brooke, and Peter, Meninak Club, November 2022

and Brooke were elementary school age and could bike back and forth between each home and Pic & Save. "It worked out pretty well for them," Phyllis said. It was a tight-knit community where everybody knew each other and watched out for others' kids.

The business community, too, was mutually supportive. Phyllis's second Christmas in town found her among the other business owners surrounding the pre-lions wedding-cake fountain in the center of The Square, offering nibbles to the carolers and guests at the annual Holiday Magic gathering. Desiring to fit in, but desperate not to cut too deeply into her startup profits, Phyllis headed to the San Marco Theatre for a few buckets of fresh popped corn that she then drizzled with a sparing amount of her expensive chocolate recipe and separated into bite-sized chunks. After that night, Phyllis realized she had a new product!

Within three years, Peterbrooke had outgrown its original location and moved up the street to 2024 where it still stands today. That's where Phyllis met her second husband, pilot and orthodontist Dr. H.L. Geiger, a native of Ohio who had opened his Jacksonville dental practice back in 1968.

The couple married at All Saints Episcopal Church in 1989 and moved to River Road when her children were 11 and 15. By then, Phyllis

had already opened her second Peterbrooke store on St. Johns Avenue as one of the Shoppes of Avondale. A year later, she opened the third, this time in Atlantic Beach near where her family had lived for a time when they were still new to the Jacksonville area.

In the mid-1990s, Phyllis enrolled



Peterbrooke Chocolatier's first location, 1983



Phyllis Geiger tempering chocolate on marble, 1985



Peterbrooke, 2024 San Marco Boulevard, 1987

in an intense confectioner's course at Gannon University in Pennsylvania to learn the science behind making big batches of chocolate. With the expansion of business, a separate production facility had become necessary, one to accommodate large vats. Peterbrooke was flourishing!

By 2002, Phyllis was ready to move farther away from the bustle. That's when she bought her current San Jose, Bob-Broward-designed river home from her

friend and mentor, Bobbi Yoffee. Phyllis had spent many hours in that house over the years, creatively working with Bobbi, a calligrapher, on ads and artwork for Peterbrooke and for Café Carmon, a bistro in San Marco that was another business Phyllis had partnered in.

In 2012, Phyllis thought she might be ready to retire. So, she sold the chocolate business to Billy Morris, CEO of Bubba Burger, and the Peterbrooke name went franchise. Brooke bought the Atlantic Beach store. Peter went in a different direction within the field of confection; he now owns Sweet Pete's Candy on Hogan Street downtown.

"There's candy all over the place, still. We never lack for any sweets," Phyllis said. Throughout the years, she often heard from others how dentists must love her being in the candy business and how she ought to marry one. Well, she did! "I wreck them. He fixes them," she would tell people. Unfortunately, her husband passed away a few years ago.

Without him, Phyllis still loves to travel. She often takes trips north to visit with Izzi. She still supports her Massachusetts alma mater. And last year, the University of Florida's Eric Friedheim Tourism Institute welcomed her to their advisory board.

When she's back home in Jacksonville, Phyllis loves to cook, as do Peter as well as his son, Daniell, Phyllis's only grandchild. What's uncanny is that Brooke's husband is chef-level, too. "My kids are major foodies. They've gone into fine cuisine," Phyllis said. Afterwards, there's no doubt what's on the family's dessert menu. Candy!