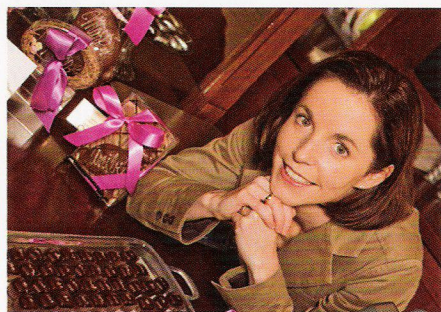


WHEN **ANDRINA BIGELOW '96** LEFT CORPORATE AMERICA BEHIND
TO TAKE THE REINS OF SEATTLE'S PREMIER CONFECTIONERY,
NO ONE WAS MORE SURPRISED—OR PLEASED—THAN HER MOTHER,
FRAN'S CHOCOLATES FOUNDER FRAN BIGELOW

Like DAUGHTER for CHOCOLATE

BY DAVID VOLK
PHOTOS BY JOEL LEVIN



"What Occidental did really well was prepare you to think through a problem," says Andrina Bigelow '96, *above*. Oxy also made her a better wordsmith: "In business it's extremely important to be able to communicate through writing." Her job also means her mother, Fran, *right*, now has more time to devote to her cookbooks.



Photo courtesy Fran's Chocolates

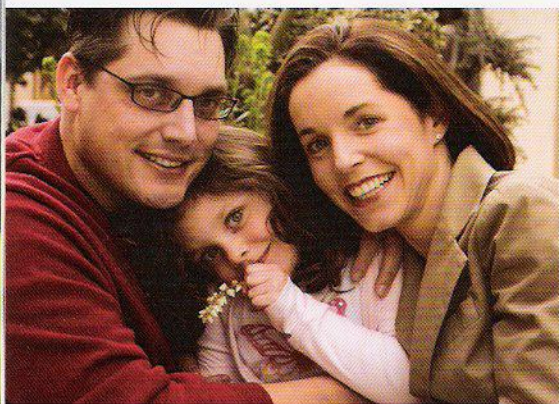
ANDRINA BIGELOW '96 is standing on the precipice of chocolate greatness.

This September, the economics major will launch her first initiative as chief executive officer of Fran's Chocolates, one of the country's top gourmet chocolate companies. Opening one of the only retail stores in Seattle's new Four Seasons Hotel is a coup: The luxury hotel gives Fran's daily access to people who appreciate high quality products while allowing the company to respond to customer pleas for a downtown store. At the same time, the building is close enough to the Pike Place Market that it's in the ideal location for tourists to discover confections so sinful, they've made it onto the pages of *Gourmet* and *Chocolatier* magazines.

The best part is, Bigelow didn't even have to compete for such a prime piece of land. "We were thrilled they approached us," she says.

If she'd had to do battle for the spot, it's easy to see how she would have won it anyway. If her Oxy education, Cornell MBA, and corporate





After working on the East Coast as a brand manager with Mattel's Disney Group and Johnson & Johnson, Bigelow returned to the Pacific Northwest in 2006 with husband Mark and daughter Taylor in tow. Within a year, she found herself running Fran's.

experience hadn't been enough, she would have charmed them out of it.

"She gets the business done, but she does it in a very pleasant way. She's got a great big smile and she's always up. People want to be around somebody who's always up," Fran Bigelow says.

Yes, *that* Fran.

Sure, Andrina may be the boss's daughter, but there's no question she's the right person for the job. Up until recently, the real question might have been "Would she take it?"

As any foodie worth their weight in gray sea salt could tell you, Fran, an accountant, started the company after discovering a passion for fine chocolate during a trip to France in the early 1980s. ("I love to cook, but I really always wanted to do desserts more than anything else," she told a *Seattle Times* writer in 2003. "...It's the thing people take away from a meal. It's what they remember.") She was so inspired by the quality of European confections that she opened a small patisserie in Seattle's Madison Park neighborhood in 1982. As demand grew, Fran's opened two additional locations. The company got its first big national break when Williams-Sonoma added Fran's almond and macadamia nut caramel Gold Bars to its retail offerings in 1986. The chocolates are now available at hundreds of specialty retailers nationwide, including Neiman Marcus and Whole Foods.

Sitting at a table in the small, no-frills office she and her mom share, the younger Bigelow has less the air of a prodigal daughter than the confidence of an executive with the experience necessary to get the job done. She may have started washing dishes in her mom's patisserie at age 6 and graduated to running the register, but Fran's still surprised she returned to the company. "I thought she'd be successful at what she did I just didn't think she'd want to come and do what I was doing," the elder Bigelow says.

Andrina had a passion for food, but chocolate wasn't in her blood; numbers were. "I was always strong in analytics and very strong in math," she says.

Mother and daughter agreed on her need for a liberal arts college, but Fran favored a small town school. Andrina opted for Occidental's close-knit community feel because it was close to a large city just like the private school she attended growing up. It was a good fit: The College's small classroom size meant she had to get up and stand in front of her peers to do presentations,

which prepared her well for the business world. She even met her future husband, Mark Eskridge '96, while at Oxy.

It didn't take her long to go corporate. She took a position in brand management in Mattel's Disney Group because she enjoyed combining her skills in finance, planning, and analysis with the challenge of creating a vision for a major product line without much consumer research to rely on. After she and Eskridge earned MBAs at Cornell, she went back into brand management at Johnson & Johnson in Skillman, N.J., where she was involved in a successful effort to reposition KY lubricants from "a problem-solution focused brand" to "an intimacy enhancement brand"—a change, she says, that led to a substantial jump in sales. "Every company she's ever been at, she's been the number one person in her group," notes Eskridge, a senior manager for segment marketing at T-Mobile in Seattle.

After having a baby in business school (Taylor, now 5), Andrina so missed Seattle that she moved back to take a job managing family plans at T-Mobile in 2006. The move prompted her to get re-engaged in the family business at a time when Fran was looking to focus more on recipe development and cookbook writing (her 2004 collection, *Pure Chocolate: Divine Desserts and Sweets from the Creator of Fran's Chocolates*, remains in print today).

Just being close to the company, Andrina started getting more involved in the family firm as Fran looked forward to focusing on recipe development and cookbook writing. Eskridge recalls her asking, "My family's got this great project, why am I not putting my skill set to work here?"

Founded in 1982 as a two-person operation, privately held Fran's Chocolates (which reportedly sells around \$5 million in confections annually) boasts a workforce of more than 40. Along with a sampling of her wares, Bigelow is shown with Fran's co-workers Amy Eutizzi-Dixon, Kalan Skelly, and Katherine Kilder.

Rather than being envious of Andrina's CEO spot, brother Dylan is glad to have her on board. The company's self-described director of chocolate (a Culinary School of America graduate) says it helps that she isn't as focused on food as he is. What Andrina can do is plan, and that's the area where the company has the greatest need, the Bigelows agree. Until now, Fran's Chocolates has primarily focused on product development, but

"She gets the business done, but she does it in a very pleasant way," Fran Bigelow says of Andrina. "She's got a great big smile and she's always up. People want to be around somebody who's always up."

Fran and Dylan say they're looking to Andrina to help establish a strategic growth plan.

The opening of the Four Seasons store is just the start. Fran's wholesale business may be growing, but Andrina believes listening to local customers and developing a plan to meet their wants is the key to success in Seattle and throughout the Northwest. At the same time, balancing demand and the firm's tradition of small-batched, handcrafted truffles—whiskey are her favorites—means she and Dylan will eventually have to find a new production facility. "There's a lot of opportunity in retail growth just in the Pacific Northwest," she says. "We're at the point where in certain seasons we've maxed out our capacity."

"The job here turned out to be more challenging than she thought," says Fran. But she's not worried, she adds, because "Andrina's big-business experience gives her the overview to know how to take a smaller company and get it to the place where we're ready to step to the next level."

Just keep her away from the kitchen. She's passionate about eating, but not necessarily about cooking. "That's the running joke—that she doesn't know how to cook," Dylan says with a laugh. "She definitely cooks for Taylor, but *nothing* like Fran." ■

David Volk is a freelance writer in Seattle.

