

'Hidden gem' cafe is a haven for

◆ World class chocolatier's cafe is also home to a school where individuals can book a tasty range of mouth-watering classes, writes Cat Thomson

Chocolate lovers have been flocking to Peebles in the Scottish Borders for their cocoa fix – and the location is the headquarters of a chocolate empire.

Ruth Hinks is a world-class chocolatier and has also been named UK Confectioner of the Year. She grew up in South Africa, but ended up setting up her chocolate school and Cocoa Black café in her husband's hometown.

"I met David in Australia, but he's born and bred in Peebles," she said. "He is called a 'stoorie foot', which means he's from here, while I'm a 'gutterblood', which means I've been brought in from outside."

Ms Hinks's father was a dentist, so while growing up sweets were not allowed. But her father encouraged all his children to earn money.

Ms Hinks wanted a double tape deck, so hatched a money-making venture to make and sell Easter eggs from her family's kitchen. "I had to kick my mum and dad out of the house kitchen for a couple of weeks," she said. "Dad wanted us to learn the value of money, he didn't just want to give us the money to go and buy things. You needed to earn it yourself, which was a good lesson, one that I've failed to teach my children."

Chocolate making is a highly technical process where temperature and humidity are critical. Ms Hinks explains: "That's another positive reason for setting up in the Borders as opposed to somewhere hot like South Africa or Australia." She tells me that Easter is her favourite time of the year, "because my career started as a teenager making Easter eggs to sell". Her two children Aiden, 17, and Delphine, 16, are more interested in eating chocolate rather than making it. But Ms Hinks said: "I don't want to force them to do something that they don't want to do. I was just lucky that I knew I always wanted to make chocolate."

After school, the delicacy specialist studied at Silwood Cookery School in Rondebosche, then worked at The London Hilton before learning chocolate making in Paris. She then moved to Melbourne where she worked as head pastry chef at the five-star Windsor Hotel.

After she met her husband in Sydney, the couple returned to Scotland to marry in 2005. She worked as head pastry chef at the Sheraton in



Edinburgh before they launched Cocoa Black in 2008.

When I chat with her, Ms Hinks is taking a break from the production kitchen where she and her team makes an extensive range of bars and selection boxes for online sales, in addition to all the delectable chocolates and cakes for Cocoa Black shop and cafe.

Ms Hinks also operates a chocolate school, located above the café every Tuesday and Saturday. Individuals can book a tasty range of mouth-watering classes, including make-your-own chocolate bars, caramels, petit fours, truffles and macarons, or opt to learn the secrets of cheesecake, tart and custard making.

Apprentice chocolatier Heather Adams joined Cocoa Black after having worked her way through every class at The Chocolate & Pastry School. She was so enthusiastic that Ms Hinks offered her a job as her new apprentice, adding: "It's working out well. I am encouraging her to enter the Junior Chocolate Masters competition next year. It will be good for her, but we're so busy I'll need to find another apprentice."

Ms Hinks still loves the process of making chocolates. But she added: "I'm not so fond of the pressure that comes with running a business... it can be quite stressful because you're thinking about everything else, but I do still enjoy it."

Ms Hinks exclusively uses Cacao Barry chocolate from Tanzania and Madagascar and is their brand ambassador responsible for developing recipes, which will be used by chefs in hotels and restaurants around the world. Cocoa Black uses nine tonnes of chocolate every year. Ms Hinks said: "It is a phenomenal amount. You wouldn't



Ruth Hinks, above and top left, is a world-class chocolatier and owner of Cocoa Black, Peebles, far right; Ruth has made appearances on TV with the likes of Susan Calman, right

think that I would use that much, but I do."

She added: "Cacao Barry watches the cocoa market for us, and they can predict and tell us what is going to happen. The cocoa market has been going crazy this year, with prices skyrocketing by 50 per cent. Hopefully, the market will settle down soon, as it does add extra cost pressure."

During Covid, Ms Hinks said "people were buying stuff trying to get through the lockdown blues but now people are watching their money a bit more". But she is still struggling to keep up with demand.

And while outsiders might think Ms Hinks has the best job in the world, conjuring up selection boxes and making television appearances with the likes of Susan Calman, she said sometimes it is tough. "I'm working six days and I can't change that," she said.



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chocolate lovers

On the menu



The Coll Hotel has ten bedrooms and is also home to the island's only pub

Idyllic Scots island hotel with stunning views is 'perfect rural hideaway'

◆ Remote Scottish island is home to an award-winning hotel and pub – the only one on the island writes Rosalind Erskine



The small hotel 'in the middle of the Atlantic', which was named one of the best in Scotland, is well worth a visit, despite being a three-hour ferry journey from the mainland.

The Coll Hotel on the eponymous island has ten bedrooms and is also home to the island's only pub.

Located in Arinagour, the business is family run and, in 2021, was named joint winner in the Independent Hotel category in the Catering Scotland (CIS) Awards, alongside the five-star Glenapp Castle in South Ayrshire.

That's not the only accolade the hotel has been awarded.

It has VisitScotland Gold status for exceeding expectations in all areas of business and won 'Best Hotel Experience Under 20 Rooms' and 'Best Eatery Experience' at the 2022 Highlands & Islands Tourism Awards.

A few years ago, the Oliphant family, who run the hotel, doubled the hotel's number of bedrooms and added an extension that includes a new restaurant, kitchen and bar.

While the hotel has a modern new look, it's been a business on the island for 150 years.

Peter Irvine's book Scotland the Best

calls it a "haven", saying: "Julie and Kevin Oliphant and their daughter Laura continue to win accolades for their exemplary island hotel and restaurant."

"A fixture for all of 150 years, under the careful and conscientious ownership of the Oliphants for the past 60.

"For visitors and locals alike, the hostelry is a haven.

"From its conservatory restaurant you look across the bay and village; from the carefully tended garden you look across the Mull."

Others have described it as a "perfect rural hideaway".

On the menu, visitors will find boat-fresh seafood, which has either been caught off the island or Mull. Specifically the lobster, langoustine, squat lobster and crab are creel caught off Coll, while the scallops are hand-dived from the Isle of Mull and smoked fish comes from the Tobermory Fish Company.

It is this fresh seafood, and the simple cooking style that have earned the hotel restaurant rave reviews, including an AA rosette for culinary excellence.

The restaurant has views of Arinagour village, the bay and the islands beyond.

In the bar, customers will find a range of Scottish gins, whisky, beers, wine and soft drinks.

There's a garden to enjoy a drink and soak up any good weather, along with the amazing views.

For guests who visit in the winter months, the island is a dark skies retreat, which means visitors may also be able to spot the Northern Lights due to the lack of light pollution.

