



Robert Lambert left Wisconsin for California in 1972 to become an artist. He soon discovered his creative expression through food. Now, with chocolate as his canvas, he is bringing to life new and original flavors inspired by his imaginative sensibilities.

Robert LAMBERT

Chocolate sauces extraordinaire

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My aunt was the one who first told me about Robert Lambert. I was at her house for dinner and she offered me some vanilla ice cream for dessert.

“Would you like some of Bob’s chocolate sauce?” she asked.

“Bob?” I asked.

“You know, Bob Lambert? Robert Lambert? He makes chocolate sauces and syrups and sells them at the farmers’ market?”

“No, I don’t know Robert,” I told her.

My aunt looked surprised. “You should,” she said, walking back into the kitchen. “Robert’s a fascinating guy.” The glass jar she brought out was classy. It had a gold-colored top and an elegant beige label with “Four Orange Chocolate Sauce” written across it. I dipped my spoon into the creamy chocolate and had a taste. I was instantly impressed. The orange flavor was so fresh, so real; I could almost taste the early-morning dew. This was no ordinary chocolate sauce. It was obviously made with considerable care and effort. I dipped my spoon in a second time. *Who is this Robert Lambert?* I thought to myself. I decided to track him down to learn more about his Four Orange Chocolate Sauce—and to see what other exciting flavors he might have to offer.

“Eat the rind?” I hesitated.

“Bite right into it,” says Robert Lambert, showing me how it’s done. The fruit’s bright orange color reminds me of a miniature mandarin, although this one is shaped more like a pear. Robert cuts a slice of the fruit and hands it to





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me to try. I nibble off half the piece. The rind is sweet, while the juice inside is tart. It's an odd but tasty combination. I pop the rest of the slice into my mouth. "It's a mandarinquat," he explains. "A kumquat hybrid. It's one of several I use in different products. I also use limequats and orangequats. They all have edible skins."

It's early afternoon and Robert and I are standing in the middle of a fruit farm on a ridge overlooking the Pacific Ocean. We're on the outskirts of Watsonville, an old farming town about a hundred miles south of San Francisco. Owned by Gene Lester, a retired IBM executive and citrus aficionado, the farm is where Robert comes to pick Seville and Bergamot oranges for his Four Orange Chocolate Sauce. He's invited me along to help him restock for a new batch of sauces.

"Gene's a real expert on citrus," Robert tells me as we grab a ladder and several empty cartons from his truck. We head over to some orange trees. "A lot of folks seek out his advice, from farmers and botanists to chefs. Gene gives me all the fruit I want, so long as I pick it myself and bring him some products in return as a trade. These oranges over here are some of what give my chocolate sauce its unique flavor."

This fruit will be transformed into what Robert calls his "not-so-simple syrups"—one of four that will go into the orange chocolate sauce, along with bergamot, Valencia and blood orange. He will juice the fruit, scrape out the pith, blanch and then candy the peel, then strain out the peel and add the juice to the candying solution to create the syrup. "It's all the essential oils in the peel combined with the flavor of the fruit," Robert explains. "No other flavored syrups offer that. Obviously it's a lot more work than just adding an extract, but I think the complexity is worth it."

While I get started on low-hanging fruit closer to the ground, Robert carefully sets his ladder against one of the trees and clambers up to the top. Twisting off the oranges one after another, he tosses them into the car-

tons below with the joyful enthusiasm of a kid on the first day of a summer job. I even catch him working with both hands at once, using only the branches and his feet for balance. It's clear he's done this many times before. During the next hour, the two of us proceed to pick ten boxes worth of fresh oranges. I'm amazed by the number of fruit we pick from just one tree—and at how physically tasking the work can be. But Robert—he can't stop smiling. No doubt the experience reminds him of his childhood summers at his grandmother's farm in Wisconsin.

The chocolate kitchen Robert rents in Marin County, just north of San Francisco, is considerably larger than I had imagined. It's an airy space, with a narrow entry way that leads into a wide, rectangular room with 30-foot high ceilings. A monochrome sea of aluminum and steel pots, stoves, refrigerators, tables, shelves, and utensils fills the interior. In the corner, clad in a bright blue sweatshirt and a pair of black Levi's and framed neatly by his surroundings, stands Robert. He's at one of his stoves, working on a thick chocolate mixture with a wooden spatula.

"Hi Robert," I say cheerfully. "What are you making today?"

"Deep Dark Chocolate," he says, referring to one of his most popular chocolate sauces. The mixture begins to turn a darker color while he continues to stir it. A whiff of steam meanders off the surface as he carefully rests the spatula against the edge of the bowl and reaches for the warmed milk that's been resting on a neighboring burner. After pouring the milk in with the chocolate, he then picks up the spatula again and stirs the mixture again. Dark to light, light to dark, the chocolate is a swirling concoction of multiple shades of brown. Moments later Robert adds the contents of another bowl, which contains a blend of various flavors and ingredients.



Robert Lambert

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Saturdays: Grand Lake Market | Oakland, CA 9AM-2PM

Sundays: San Rafael Civic Center | San Rafael, CA 8AM-1PM

Watching him up close, I start to notice how efficiently Robert works. And how quietly. From one task to the next, one position to another, he makes no unnecessary movements. Whether it's the way he holds his arms while stirring chocolate, moves between the stove and tables, or prepares his workstation, Robert is a minimalist. And he's always active. In the two hours I spent with him at the kitchen, there wasn't a moment when he wasn't intently doing something. Robert's actions have an elegance about them that remind me of a subtle, choreographed dance.

"It's all about rhythm," he says. The man has now donned a pair of large reading glasses and has begun carefully pouring the chocolate sauce into the individual jars he lined up earlier on the table.

"Rhythm?" I ask.

"Rhythm," he says. "One, two, three . . ." He fills another glass jar with chocolate sauce and waits for the last drops to fall from the jug. Each jar receives the same amount of chocolate, the same number of final drops. Not a second is wasted between jars, as Robert moves from one to the next in one smooth, fluid motion—his hands steady, his eyes fixed on the chocolate. He manages to fill about fifty jars without skipping a beat or spilling a drop. And it's so quiet. The only sound comes from the gas stove. Robert doesn't talk, doesn't sing, doesn't even hum.

Robert uses expensive ingredients for his chocolate sauces, and the production work is intensive. Because ingredient costs are relatively fixed, he has to focus on working as efficiently as possible. No movement can be wasted. Spilling even a single drop and having to stop to clean it up is time and energy wasted—and profit lost. Robert relies on all his experience—as well as his palate and senses—to create a product as close to perfection as he can.

"So, what do you think about while you're working?" I ask him.

"Nothing," he says.

Nothing?

"Just my eyes and my hands, nothing in between."

"So it's kind of like you're meditating," I suggest.

"That's right."





I ask Robert if he's working on any new flavors.

"Coconut. It's something my customers at the farmers' markets have been requesting for some time," he explains. "I've experimented with a couple of different combinations, but I don't think I've got the right coconut extract yet. I know it will be a dark chocolate, that I'll have some rum in there, some Madagascar vanilla, and maybe some brown sugar."

Finished with the current batch of chocolate, Robert places gold metal lids on each of the jars. Stacking them in one hand, like extra-large poker chips, he drops the lids one by one onto the jars with a gentle clank. Row by row, jar by jar he works. Click, clack, click, clack. He moves smoothly, rhythmically, pausing briefly only to pick up another stack of lids or readjust them in his hand. Grabbing hold of some fasteners, Robert begins sealing the jars. Once again, jar by jar, row by row—he gives each fastener three quick twists followed by one final squeeze.

About three-fourths of his way through Robert unexpectedly lets out a quiet sigh. He smiles wryly at me, bobbing his head right and left as he tightens another jar, this time with cartoonlike exaggeration. But the lighthearted moment passes as quickly as it appeared. His smile gone, Robert is back to fastening the jars, intently focused on the task at hand. When he has finished the last row, he sets the filled jars aside and begins laying out a new set of empty ones. Back to the routine he returns.

Robert is in the kitchen three times a week. On Saturdays he's at the farmers' market in Oakland, on Sundays the market in San Rafael. The man rarely takes a break. It seems he suffers from the same affliction shared by artisans around the world: Pride—in his workmanship, in his commitment to quality, in his name. It's what drives him to create, to seek out something original, something truly extraordinary. *

