

# CANDY WRAPPER

## Breaking Through

Call it fate or coincidence, but Stephanie Acho-Tartoni's impromptu decision to purchase a chocolate shop empowered her entrepreneurial instincts.

**T**o compete in the National Football League (NFL), size, speed, ability and desire all factor into the mix. To become the NFL's official chocolate supplier for the Super Bowl, physical attributes don't play a role. Rather, it's all about the product and service. Of course, taste, presentation and quality reign supreme.

And while Stephanie Acho-Tartoni has a sports pedigree of her own — she competed in cross-country for the Mercy High School track team in Farmington, Mich. — the retail chocolatier knows that succeeding in business, particularly within the competitive retail chocolate sector, requires more than being a casual fan. Instead, it's about satisfying the customer.

Despite being dwarfed by larger and better-known businesses, Acho-Tartoni managed to execute her game plan and score with the NFL, twice becoming the official chocolate supplier for the championship event.

Amazingly, Acho-Tartoni didn't set out to be a chocolatier. Just prior to being part of a massive layoff from an automotive supplier in the Detroit area nearly 15 years ago, Acho-Tartoni had contemplated entering the import/export business. In looking for an office site in downtown historic Northville, Mich., she spotted a shop for sale: Chocolates by Renee.

Call it serendipity, perhaps fate, even an epiphany. However one characterizes the moment, it prompted Acho-Tartoni to cross the street and dive headlong into the world of chocolate. She never followed up on her import/export idea.

Today, the small-town chocolate retailer continues to tackle large and small accounts with verve and veracity. In addition

to having supplied the NFL, Chocolates by Renee has sent baskets to such stars as Elton John, Billy Joel and Alanis Morissette.

What's her secret? Quality ingredients, daily handmade production and frequent innovation tailored to customers' "special likes."

For example, the shop always has made dark chocolate cherry clusters. One day, a client asked if Acho-Tartoni could add fresh ground cinnamon to his favorite cluster. She did, and since that time, dark chocolate cherry clusters with cinnamon have become a customer favorite.

Another signature item for Chocolates by Renee is what Acho-Tartoni calls "mammoths" — a combination of cashews, pecans or macadamia nuts and special secret caramel corn drizzled in dark chocolate.

In addition to mammoths, the shop produces a variety of chocolate truffles, nut clusters, caramels rolled in wax papers, almond butter toffee and specialty items. Acho-Tartoni also has added candy to her lineup of confections, making her store ([www.chocolatesbyrenee.com](http://www.chocolatesbyrenee.com)) a destination for Northville residents and tourists.

**What did you think you would be when you grew up?**

The youngest Supreme Court justice.

**Name some of your favorite movies.**

"Rat Race" and "Scarface" ... who doesn't love it?



At her Northville, Mich., retail shop, Chocolate by Renee's Stephanie Acho-Tartoni drenches an apple in caramel, which will be rolled in whole pecans and then covered in chocolate. (Inset) In making butter almond toffee, Acho-Tartoni bathes the piece in pure milk chocolate.

**Describe your perfect dream vacation.**  
I'm living it.

**What book are you currently reading?**  
"The Strong-Willed Child" by Dr. James Dobson. By the way, I have three of them.

**Aside from a family member, whom would you most want to be stranded with on a deserted island?**  
Famed secret agent MacGyver and Robert Irvine, the chef from "Dinner: Impossible."

**What's your pet peeve?**  
When my children eat all the marshmallows from the *Lucky Charms* and leave me with the oats.

**I'd give anything to meet:**  
Matt Lauer from "The Today Show."

**Best piece of advice I've received:**  
Work as if everything depends on you, pray as if everything depends on God.

**What excites you about your job?**  
Knowing that other people are happiest when they eat our product. ☺