



"I fell in love with making chocolates when I was at Dolce Vita.

I came to Dolce Vita in 2016 to launch their coffee program and at that time, my coworker Marvin James was making most of Dolce Vita's chocolates.

I became really intrigued by the chocolates and trained with Marvin and Josh Keith, but since there wasn't anywhere locally where I could train further, I started doing a lot of my own research and watching tutorials.

It was then that I found the whole world of painted bonbons. I am also an artist and have been selling my work on Etsy since 2011. Art creates a balance in my life. I tend to be unsettled if I don't have a creative outlet and being able to create painted chocolates fed that creativity.

So I ordered our first set of colored cocoa butters and began experimenting with art and chocolate. I headed up our chocolate making because I wanted to be able to offer chocolates more consistently. But chocolate-making really has to be done in a temperature-controlled environment and a kitchen with a

convection oven like the one in Dolce Vita didn't provide that.

At that same time in 2019, work was finishing up on the Eleanor building where ChocoBella is now and Marvin and I kept talking to John, the owner of Dolce Vita and the Eleanor, about letting us move chocolate production to the Eleanor. We knew it would be the perfect spot.

John was the one who gave us the push to open our own space and Marvin and I talked about if we could really do this. I ended up calling a good friend of mine who is chef for his advice, and he challenged me, asking if I thought Florence was ready for a shop like this. I told him I didn't know, but I had a good feeling about it.

After some research and talking to our families we decided to go for it.

I signed up for a three-month professional Belgian chocolate academy training and we also applied for one of the Downtown Florence incentive programs. Writing the business plan for that program had us asking ourselves if chocolate would be enough. We knew from working in downtown that there was a demand for ice cream and I had discovered in my research that other chocolate shops had success offering gelato in addition to chocolate. Since we were already offering these specialized Belgian chocolates, we thought gelato would be a perfect fit.

However, we wondered again whether Florence would be ready for gelato because nowhere else around here offers it.

But Florence has really embraced us. When we had our grand opening in November and there were lines of people down the street, I was smiling ear to ear but also crying. I couldn't believe it. The support from the community was just overwhelming.

And it helped reinforce the idea that Florence was ready for us."

- Ranny Starnes, co-owner of ChocoBella