

Chocolats Andrée closing shop on its own terms

It's four days before Chocolats Andrée is scheduled to close for good and a few minutes before the chocolate shop opens at noon, there are already a couple of customers waiting outside. A lack of customers isn't one of the factors pushing Stéphanie Saint-Denis to close the shop that her grandmother and great-aunt opened in 1940. "The last three years have been our most profitable years," she said. "It was a steady increase every year."

There are other challenges for Saint-Denis, some key employees, who worked at the store for between 30 and 37 years, have recently retired, and while the business is doing well, the cost of maintaining the heritage building where the store is located is becoming unaffordable. For Saint-Denis, the decision to close the store now was a decision to close it on her own terms. "I think it's best for the employees to go like this, rather than just put a sign on the door at some point and say I can't make it anymore," Saint-Denis said.

It was also a chance to say goodbye to her customers. "That was something that was very, very important because some of our customers have been with us for three generations, the least we could do is say thank you," she said. Customers have been saying goodbye, too. "We feel very humbled by the outpouring of love that has come from our customers who have been visiting us for the last time, placing a last order or getting their last box of chocolates. They tell us that our chocolates have been on their table for so many years and it's just extremely, extremely nice to just close the circle and get to meet them again and listen to their stories," Saint-Denis said. "This is the cherry on the icing for us." Saint-Denis owns the building that houses the store — her grandmother used to live above the business — and for several years that allowed her to control the cost of rent.

But now it has become a source of new costs. After a recent incident of vandalism, which required repairs to the brickwork, Saint-Denis said that due to the building's heritage status, each individual brick had to be numbered and put back in its original position. It's those kind of costs that are unaffordable for the small business and while the chocolate shop is profitable, it doesn't have the cash flow to get bank loans to do repairs on the building, so Saint-Denis has sold the building. "I think we are, in fact, losing something. This store, Chocolats Andrée has been on Parc Ave. for the past 78 years, this is where it all started," Saint-Denis said. "We are losing a savoir faire of hand-dipping, of working and tempering the chocolate by hand, it is definitely a trade, and the recipes, we all have them in our heads here at Chocolats Andrée."

When Saint-Denis took over the store from her mother, the way the chocolates were made stayed the same. "When I took over 10 years ago, it was something that I decided not to change, not to go into different recipes with different flavours, so our recipes are very, very traditional and this is what our customers come back to, customer service but also the quality of the ingredients and the way they are prepared by hand-dipping them, I do believe it makes a difference," Saint-Denis said.

Saint-Denis isn't sure what she'll do next — she'd like to keep working with chocolate though and she hopes there will be some sort of follow-up to Chocolats Andrée, even it comes in a different form. There are some things that she'll miss. "The staff, the atmosphere here and definitely, definitely, the clients," she said, "and the smell of the caramel au chocolat."

Despite its profitability, Stéphanie Saint-Denis says she is closing her third-generation family business, Chocolats Andrée, because of the mounting financial pressures that come with owning the building it's housed in. She is embracing the chance to say goodbye to longtime clients.