



"In Belgium, chocolate making is so prolific that when I completed six years as a student at the Institute of Foodstuffs in Antwerp, having worked for some of the finest patisseries in the Flemish and Walloon regions, I knew there was no point trying to set up my own business there," says Igor Van Gerwen, owner of the House of Anvers. "I had no capital and the established chocolate makers had been around for generations. There was simply too much competition. I didn't stand a chance."

"So, at age 20, I set off to see the world and seek my fortune. My parents expected me to be back home in two or three months. That was in 1986. I guess they miscalculated," he laughs.

When Igor arrived in Tasmania, it was love at first sight.

"I knew I wanted to make my home and build a business here. I started out working in Klaas' Bakery in Devonport as a pastry chef. At the same time, I was working nights, making chocolates to sell through some local shops. My chocolates were popular and soon I was supplying stores in Launceston, too. I couldn't maintain my day job and my moonlighting, so I took the

plunge and focused on the chocolates."

Igor's first foray in to the chocolate business did not go well.

"I was great at chocolate but bad at business," Igor says. "Costings, marketing, logistics and even basic accounting were beyond me. I forgot to charge sales tax and when I failed to do a credit check on some distributors, they went under and took my money with them. It was a disaster."

"Not only that - I had it in mind that I was the only person who could make the chocolates. I was completely bogged down in trying to fill orders. There was no time to even think about the business."

Rescue came in the form of a kindly retired businessman. "I was helpless, so I basically let him run my business for me for a year so I could learn from him," Igor says. "Not only did I learn to do bookwork, he also convinced me to delegate. I reluctantly agreed to train some staff in how to handle chocolate. This wasn't as straightforward as it seemed. I had to liaise with TAFE and ask them to adapt their existing modules to suit a

smaller business - back then the confectionery course was geared to bigger enterprises. These days, staff training is a major part of Anvers' success with all our staff trained to at least a certificate III level."

Igor says that his high staff retention can be attributed to the pride his staff have in the unique trade they are trained in: "We have 40 staff, a couple of whom are due for long service leave. We don't pay our staff any more than anyone else but we have a fantastic culture where everyone chips in to help one another and they have a real sense of achievement about the work they do."

The wholesale chocolate is still the biggest part of Igor's business but he says the tourism component is rapidly picking up.

"I was astonished the first time some people knocked on the door and asked if they could see how chocolate is made. In Belgium, chocolate making is just so ordinary, you wouldn't dream of asking for a tour of a factory. It would be like an Australian wanting to see how a bakery works. I was bemused."



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