

# Mont Blanc Gourmet: Success in a Bottle

**M**ont Blanc Gourmet is a Denver-based company that focuses on product formulation of syrups and confections for top-tier café and restaurant chains. They specialize in gourmet chocolate syrups for coffee-based beverages and they also work with large quick-service chains to build their specialty beverage offerings. Michael Szyliowicz is the chocolatier and co-founder of Mont Blanc Gourmet. Following college graduation, he and his mother, Irene, enrolled at Ecole de Paris des Métiers de la Table, “Paris School of Culinary Arts,” and trained as chocolatiers. It was through their passion for fine chocolate and the belief that it was not being made in the United States that Mont Blanc Gourmet was born. The mother and son team started their specialty chocolate-making business out of their home in 1985. They installed a professional-grade kitchen in the basement and created gourmet chocolates for premium hotels, restaurants, and high-end department stores. Their clients included The Plaza Hotel, Ritz-Carlton hotels, Bloomingdale’s and Marshall Field’s. Their chocolates were even served on Pope John Paul II’s airplane. In 1989, the company created the first all-natural, instant, gourmet cocoa mix, and in 1991 began supplying it to new coffee shops and cafés. In 2000, they launched a line of premium syrups and drink mixes that continue to capitalize on the specialty coffee revolution. This forward-thinking philosophy has positioned Mont Blanc as a leader in creating quality, innovative products that appeal to the sophisticated food and beverage palate of today’s consumers.

Eric Nakata is the Director of Research and Development at the company. In this role, he leads Mont Blanc Gourmet’s innovation team to develop inspired products that align with the specific taste profiles of its customers’ end-users. Nakata has an innate ability to combine the scientific aspect of research and development with the imaginative and visionary nature of culinary virtuosity. His versatility and capacity to think “outside the box” is invaluable, and he is a primary catalyst for innovation at Mont Blanc Gourmet.

Like most in the world of research and development, Nakata has a solid background in science and worked as an anatomical pathology technologist before becoming a professionally trained chef. After graduating from the California School of Culinary Arts, he worked with and learned from two Certified Master Chefs and one Certified



Master Baker, becoming a skilled chef in his own right. Nakata has developed various foods and menus as a product development chef for prominent, U.S. food & beverage companies. In 2005, he was named the senior culinary specialist at Nestlé USA. Over the years, Eric has also worked with notable chefs such as Wolfgang Puck, Mario Batali, Roy Yamaguchi, Richard Blais and Martin Yan.

Following are interviews with both Michael Szyliowicz and Eric Nakata of Mont Blanc Gourmet.



**Interview with Michael Szyliowicz:**



What initially attracted you to the business of chocolate?

The idea in 1985 was to provide the U.S. with the same type of gourmet, high-end chocolates that were available in Europe. I spent the time and learned how to make exceptional quality

chocolates in Paris and brought that knowledge back to the States. In the beginning, we focused on making French truffles and chocolates, and even though we've moved toward other products, chocolate has always been a cornerstone of Mont Blanc Gourmet.

What were your first steps in starting Mont Blanc Gourmet?

After a few years of selling handmade, gourmet chocolates from our retail storefront, we saw an opportunity to expand. We created a product that we could sell to customers that had a much longer shelf life than our handmade chocolates and didn't have the seasonality issues that chocolate truffles did. Always maintaining the same quality found in our chocolates, we combined cocoa powders and milk and cream powders and blended the perfect cocoa mix. The product was a huge success, and we brought on a manufacturer to create much larger amounts. Mont Blanc Gourmet really took off from there.

What was your vision for the company when it started? How has that vision changed, if at all, over the years?

Our vision has always been to create the highest quality of chocolate that we can. Over the years, we've experimented and expanded the types of

products and services we offer, but our commitment to quality chocolate is still as strong as it was 20 years ago.

At what point in time did you realize that your business had the potential to be a market leader?

In early 2001 our custom formulation business was skyrocketing and we were producing huge volumes of products for the largest specialty coffee companies in the U.S. After being listed among the fastest growing companies in the country three years in a row is when our entire team realized we had the potential to be a market leader in this industry.

What is the strongest growth product/area for Mont Blanc Gourmet?

One of the most interesting and successful services Mont Blanc Gourmet provides is custom formulation. We work with large specialty coffee operators and major quick-service restaurant operators to create customized drink options that their customers will love. For instance, currently we're formulating a triple hot chocolate that one of our clients hopes to launch next winter. This client approached us for help, knowing about our expertise and track record with them for successfully launching new and unique beverages. Helping to create these specialty drinks through custom formulation is where Mont Blanc Gourmet is experiencing the majority of its growth.

Mont Blanc Gourmet was the first company to supply single-origin chocolate syrup to the specialty coffee industry. What other innovations are you proud of?

In addition to the single-origin chocolate syrup, Mont Blanc Gourmet offered the first fair trade certified chocolate syrup and was the first to provide other retailers with drinking chocolate. Innovation is at the essence of

everything we do, right down to our business model. Our team in Denver works with companies around the world to create beverage solutions, and then we outsource the production to one of our trusted manufacturing partners to keep costs low and provide maximum flexibility for our customers. Nobody in the industry is built like that, and it makes Mont Blanc Gourmet extremely nimble and competitive in the market.

What gives you the greatest satisfaction in your business?

The greatest satisfaction for me is working with a customer that lets us develop the product with them, and then watch them successfully launch our drink. We work with the customer from concept to cup, so to see a product launch with success is a feeling like no other.

Do you still get a thrill when you see Mont Blanc Gourmet syrup containers displayed at coffee retailers around the world?

Of course! I literally have walked into retailers in England, the Middle East, and Asia and have seen our distinctive bottle behind the counter. It's just so fun. Because Mont Blanc Gourmet typically acts as a partner for our clients, we don't always get to see the retail customers enjoying the end product when it launches. It truly is a thrill, as you said, when I'm able to see the product on a retailer's shelf, and particularly when I see their customers enjoying it.

What skills does Eric Nakata, your new Director of Research and Development, bring to team Mont Blanc Gourmet?

To bring that culinary background combined with the research and development skill set and knowledge specific to commercialization is truly unique. Eric knows how to take a culinary trend and expand it to a commercial scale, which not many people

can do. When working with food, you have to be very mindful of how a recipe will translate at the manufacturing level. Precision is key in our business, and Eric's unique background will support his work on the commercialization process.

Who are your culinary heroes?

Obviously Julia Child was a pioneer, and I would imagine most in this business view her as a culinary hero. She taught all of America that food could really be great, and I think we all still benefit from what she brought to the world. I also think you need to give a lot of credit to Alfred Peet of Peet's Coffee for creating the specialty coffee industry in America. Premium coffee has been such a giant part of our lives for the past 20 years, and he gets kudos for helping all of America see how great coffee can be. I also want to mention Serge Neveu, the man who taught me to make chocolate 25 years ago. He is considered one of the best in France, and he still is training aspiring chocolatiers at culinary school today. I'm the only foreign student he ever trained, and he still tells me that I'm his favorite student because I was the only one who ever did anything with my training as radically different as Mont Blanc Gourmet. Without him, I could never be doing what I do today.



**Interview with Eric Nakata:**

What factors led to your decision to join the team at Mont Blanc Gourmet?

Mont Blanc Gourmet is a family-owned and operated company with a great history and foundation for us to build on. While we operate from a small office in Denver, our clientele have a global reach, which makes for exciting growth potential. I think this team can do some amazing things with our talent and expertise.

In contrast to your previous position at Nestle, you are now part of a 12-person team at a privately held company.

of your brand is the key to success.

What's next for Mont Blanc Gourmet?

Mont Blanc Gourmet is constantly evolving, and today we're working with customers to develop all types of specialty beverages, from fruit smoothies to blended coffee drinks. Demand in the market also constantly is changing, and there are two industry trends I'm very excited about. As the single-cup coffee market grows, I think you'll see an increase in high-end, single-cup hot chocolate, and I think more people are going to want to enjoy gourmet hot chocolate at home. Also, in retail stores, I think you'll see menus begin to differentiate chocolate offerings for their customers - whether that's single-origin or rain forest or blended or hot or cold. Consumers are beginning to understand differences in flavor profiles, and being able to choose their chocolate could be the next big trend.



What differences are there between the two positions and workplaces?

The two positions are actually very similar. Obviously, I'm working with different products in

different location and with different customers, but those differences are not drastic. One of the main differences I've noticed is our ability to be nimble. At the large corporations, no matter how



fast you move and operate, the bottom line is it has to go through so many levels of testing and management that projects can take years. Here at Mont Blanc Gourmet, it can take as little as a few days to move a project to the next phase.

Before you attended the California School of Culinary Arts you worked as an anatomical pathology technologist. Why did you make the career change? Does your training help you at all as a culinary product developer? Human sciences was and still is very intriguing to me. I loved working in the operating room and in the morgue, but I found out early in my career that my

true passion was cooking. I love being able to play with fire, create something from nothing and the ability to be both analytical and creative in a single dish. I believe my background and training makes me incredibly unique in this industry, as I have the discipline of a scientist with the passionate creativity of an artist. When situations arise that require solutions, I often find myself analyzing the solution much the way Dr. House does on the television show *House*: unorthodox, yet systematic.

As a chef trained in savory and baking, how have each of these disciplines helped in your research and development work?

To me, the savory side of food is all about thinking on your feet, being free in your mind and feeling the flow of the ingredients. Baking is much more precise but still is a great deal of fun when playing with flavor combinations. It also is imperative in baking that your base measurements and

methodology are correct if you want any chance of success. With the combination of both backgrounds, the secret to my success has been to trust my instincts, have fun developing and be mindful of the bases of the formulas to avoid any potential problems.

What are the biggest challenges in developing new chocolate products?

The biggest challenge is trying to meet customers' individual flavor profiles. Chocolate is very tactile and nostalgic, so when someone asks for a particular flavor note, you need to get inside their head to figure out what flavor cues are resonating with them.

How is chocolate unique from a culinary product developer's point of view?

Chocolate is a wonderful ingredient, and it pairs well with so many different fruits and spices. It can play the leading role or round out and soften a product by taking a secondary role.

Are there any particular challenges in using chocolate in beverage development?

Chocolate is also very temperamental: silky and fluid or light and airy. With too much agitation or outside influence from alcohol, water or solids, chocolate can become grainy, stiff or just plain overwhelming.

What do you enjoy most about developing chocolate products?

The sweet aroma of chocolate never gets old. It's not like you're stuck in a kitchen developing concentrated fish sauce, as I've done in previous jobs.

Chocolate and coffee are flavor soul mates. Why? How difficult is it to find new and different ways to combine them?

Like you said, chocolate and coffee are perfect siblings - yin and yang. On their own, they are very complex and robust, much like wine, but their essences are very different. Together, they complement each other perfectly. With global influences taking firm hold in the culinary world, it seems as though the flavor trends and the combinations of the two are ever broadening, and new chocolate and coffee mixtures are emerging all over.

Do you have any practical advice for our readers about working with chocolate?

Buy the best you can afford. Taste, taste and taste. Have fun! Just like a good wine, you'll be surprised at what wonderful pairings you can make with chocolate. And the best part? You can eat your mistakes!

*Join the Fine Chocolate Industry Association, the world's premier independent cacao advocacy organization — strengthen the chocolate industry, learn from fellow members, and receive valuable benefits.*

"The FCIA community is a very important and absolutely unique resource for those of us who are passionate about fine chocolate. For me and my team, the informal networking and the more formal information sharing is invaluable. There is simply no other forum like it in our industry."

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