

CASE STUDY – CHOCOLATIER / FOOD TECHNOLOGIST

Chocolatier Vikki Geall is a food technologist who works as part of the New Product Development (NPD) team at Thorntons, where she's responsible for creating the boxed sets of chocolates.

Vikki, 31, thinks she has the perfect job and believes hers is a role ideally suited to anyone with creative flair and a genuine interest in food. "I was never keen on science at school," she explains. "In fact, I already had a place at Art College when I took a summer job at Thorntons. I started work in the hand-made department and I loved it so much I never left."

After moving into NPD seven years ago, Vikki has undertaken extensive training to equip her for the role, completing courses in food hygiene and food safety, cake decorating and chocolate rheology (studying the texture and thickness of chocolate). Last year, she obtained a foundation degree in food science and nutrition from Nottingham Trent University.

"Despite my aversion to science as a teenager, I very much enjoy learning about the science theory behind the practical work I do," says Vikki. "I also love the creative side of the job – developing new recipes, trying out different raw materials and investigating natural alternatives. Because the industry never stands still, there are always new and exciting challenges in developing products. For example, we have recently removed all hydrogenated fats from our chocolates, so we spent time working to find alternatives that don't compromise the taste or shelf-life."

In creating Thorntons' boxed sets, Vikki works on the whole development process for each individual chocolate - from devising new recipes, to inputting on the design of the final decoration.

"I would say that 80 per cent of the recipes we come up with never make it into the finished boxes of chocolates," she explains. "If we are introducing, say, four new chocolates into a box, we'll come up with about 12 different alternatives and whittle them down."

The job also enables Vikki and her team to delve into the past in the search for inspiration. “Thorntons was established in 1911, and we have boxes and boxes of hand-written recipes, all developed before the introduction of computers. It’s not unusual for us to refer back to these old recipes, and look at ways of updating and refreshing them.”

Vikki is also the kitchen supervisor, a job which requires good organisational skills as she’s responsible for delegating the workloads of the seven-strong NPD team, and ensuring raw materials are stocked up. Strong communication skills are also key to Vikki’s role. She is required to work closely with the marketing team so she can tailor her recipes to respond to ever-changing consumer demand, and with the factory floor, to ensure her creations can be mass-produced.

Vikki is keen to recommend the job: “Of course, getting paid to taste chocolate is a bonus, but I think working in new product development would be fantastic whatever branch of food manufacturing you are involved in. It’s exciting being at the cutting edge of such a fast-moving sector where you are working to identify, and respond to, industry trends. The sector is crying out for bright young people and there are massive opportunities.”

FACTFILE – CHOCOLATIER

Benefits

Aside from the never-ending supply of chocolate, there are plenty of opportunities to travel. Chocolatiers working in new product development are expected to visit suppliers, carry out competitive shopping in Europe and America, and attend international trade fairs to keep up with the latest developments.

Downsides

The job is not good if you have to watch your weight. The hours aren’t uniform, and can be long, particularly in the run-up to the launch of a new product, for example.

Salary

Salaries for research and development scientists and technologists range from £25,000 to £35,000. Food scientists and technologists in senior management positions could earn over £65,000.

Getting there

A degree is the preferred route, ideally in food science or technology, although a general science degree may suffice. It is also possible to start as a laboratory or factory floor technician and work up the career ladder, although this route is only feasible if you and your employer are willing to invest in further training.

Further information

www.improvetd.co.uk.