

# Cherie Earle Sugar & Spice Chocolates

## RCI board member profile

*Exeter, London, Strathroy and Bayfield, Ontario  
Canada  
RCI member since 1981*

In 1979 Cherie Earle started the Sugar & Spice Chocolates business in Exeter, Ontario, Canada. Twenty-two years and four more stores later, she serves on the Retail Confectioners International (RCI) board. In 1979 she was a stay-at-home mom, content with her kids. Now she's not content until all five stores feature the high level of quality and creativity she wants Sugar & Spice Chocolates to be known for each season.

Sugar & Spice Chocolates was born when a storefront became available in Exeter (population 4,000). When Cherie went to a bank for help in financing a candy store people at the bank laughed, but since there was a silent partner with financial backing, they reluctantly gave her the financing. The first shop was so tiny the staff kept their coats in their cars because there was no space to hang them. Customers would come in one door and would be let out the back door because they couldn't even turn around.

In the beginning the company sold bulk nuts, candy, chocolates, coffee, tea and spices in the store. But the flavor of the chocolates was affected by the spices stored nearby, so they discontinued selling the spices in bulk. Instead, items that would work in conjunction with chocolate—containers and complementary gifts such as mugs, baskets, coffee, teas, unique dolls, quilts—offer Exeter customers more gift possibilities.

In Exeter, the best locations for high-traffic businesses are near the two main highways going through town. Two Sugar & Spice shops are on these routes. The business has locations in three other communities.

**Exeter, Ontario (Main St.)** This is the third location along Main Street. From the first tiny shop they squeezed into for 10 years, they moved to another larger shop along Main Street. In September of 2000, they bought a 140-year-old former drugstore to convert into a retail store. Within six weeks, they refinished floors, repainted inside and out, closed one Main Street candy store at Halloween, moved everything to the other store and opened two days after Halloween, all ready for Christmas.



Carol Davidson (employee), Cherie Earle and Stephanie Mason (employee), outside one of Cherie's Sugar & Spice Chocolate shops.

**Exeter, Ontario (Highway 83 store with factory)** At first Cherie and her partner were making chocolates in Cherie's farmhouse parlor and kitchen. Approximately 17 years ago, they built their factory.

**Bayfield, Ontario (six months of the year)** People throughout the southwest region of Ontario vacation in the Lake Huron waterfront community of Bayfield, 11 miles from Exeter. Sugar & Spice Chocolates is open in Bayfield May 24 through mid-November to serve the "cottage people." Cherie has been delighted to realize that many of the Bayfield customers track down their favorite treats in Exeter for Christmas, Valentine's Day or Easter, when the Bayfield store is closed.

**London, Ontario, and Strathroy, Ontario (store-within-a-store formats)** Five years ago they arranged for a store-within-a-store in Strathroy using a 17' x 13' space; two years later they opened that same concept in London, a city of 400,000. These are in Loblaw and Zahrs grocery stores.

All five stores are within an hour's radius when driving. Cherie is hands-on with all five stores, trying to visit each store once a week.

Transitioning from one to two and even to three stores wasn't so hard, she says, but adding the fourth and fifth stores was most difficult because of travel and staffing. Once serving a community of 4,000 people with one store and now serving four cities with the largest having a population of 400,000, they have made some adjustments. Cherie and her partner Gerhard Kuhn are now happy with their locations and plan to grow their business within them. ▶