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Covered in Chocolate:

Indulge yourself this holiday season

BY HILARY HELLENS

Chocolate can transport you to the bustling metropolis of Paris, a tiny factory in Sicily, or to the exotic back roads of Madagascar. Gone are the days of the simple chocolate bar. Chocolate has taken on a whole new grown-up (and health-conscious) persona. Got a hankering for the sweet stuff? I checked out some of the best places in the area to satisfy your chocolate cravings.

If you're looking to find homemade truffles, a friendly atmosphere and fresh-roasted coffee, The Belted Goat at 2000 Fearington Village Center in Pittsboro is the place to go. The Fearington House restaurant's chocolatier, Jill Leckey, joined the Fearington in 2005 after training at the French Culinary Institute and working for the well-known Jacques Torres Chocolate shop in New York. Leckey hand bakes truffles, pastries and desserts that are available for sale at The Belted Goat. The most popular truffle is the lavender and lime truffle. Some other truffles available include Irish cream, mango, rum, and pineapple, all of which are free of preservatives and artificial flavors. In addition, The Belted Goat carries an array of chocolate bars including MarieBelle chocolate bars from New York and Cote d'Or and Dolfin Chocolat chocolate bars from Belgium.

For a huge selection of chocolate – in all its forms – from around the world, try A Southern Season, located at University Mall in Chapel Hill. A popular treat here is the French chocolate truffle. "It is the best I have

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Hillsborough's Best Kept Secret



BY LAURA ZAVELSON

You've seen it while browsing Peacock Alley, A Southern Season and Dovecote. It's that beautiful ceramic dinnerware glazed in the colors of Tuscany. It's the delicate yet somehow whimsical champagne glass. It's the soup tureen shaped like an opera singer and the serving platter shaped like a butterfly. It's Vietri.

So if you already know about Vietri, what's the big secret? The word that's music to the ears of shoppers everywhere – Outlet Store. At the end of November, the Vietri outlet store—that until now has only had limited hours—celebrated the grand opening of expanded hours and expanded space. If you love Vietri, you have to go. It's your chance to complete that set of dinnerware or finally buy the coordinating accessories at a great price. It's also your chance to snap up



one-of-a-kind samples – pieces that Vietri considered, but decided not to include in one of their lines.

If you don't know Vietri, it's a line of tabletop, gift and accessory items—functional art really—hand-selected from Italy. The company was founded more than 25 years ago when sisters Susan and Francis Gravely and their mom visited Italy and fell in love with the dinnerware at the San Pietro Hotel on the Amalfi coast. They brought back the pieces that formed their very first line. As they were both living in Chapel Hill at the time, they started a search

for warehouse space and offices and chose to set up their headquarters in Hillsborough. Now the products are sold through top retailers in the U.S., Canada and throughout the world.

Several times a year, Susan, who is the CEO and in charge of product development, goes with the Vietri art directors to visit artisans all over Italy—Venice, Umbria, Tuscan, Milan, and Sicily. There, they are introduced to see the latest designs, shapes and colors. As sister Francis, VP

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 www.vietri.com
 (Directions available on the Web)

In October, Susan and Francis gathered together 59 Vietri shop owners and passionate Vietri collectors and set sail aboard the four-masted schooner SEACLOUD. The voyage originated in Naples and included visits to the Amalfi Coast, Sicily and Malta. The intimate group immediately became fast friends as they toured Vietri's "insider places" and met artisans and painters. The trip was so successful, they are hoping to plan several more.

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of communications, explains, "each region has its own hand and there is never a shortage of new products and creativity." Not surprising, since Italy is so often on the leading edge of design in other areas like fashion, furniture and automobiles. The various art forms influence the others leading to constant innovation.

And the Vietri product development team is constantly sending ideas over the Atlantic as well. They often share suggestions from their stores, customers and sales reps as well as their knowledge of North American trends with the artists. The company launches a new group of products—at various national trade shows—four times a year.

If the description of the trip is making you yearn for a glimpse of Italy, take some time to check out the Vietri Web site. Not only does it contain Francis' blog entries from the trip, it is also rich in photographs of Italy. While you're there, you can search through the entire Vietri product line and then use the store locator to find out who carries the pieces you want.

At the end of the day, it's no wonder the company has such a loyal following of customers and collectors. Vietri is considered a leader not only in tabletop but also in design. And when you bring it into your home it somehow fits with your other belongings and becomes a part of the way you communicate your own personal style. ■

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