

My Special Place Series: Sharon Spiegel Wagner

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On a hot afternoon in Johannesburg, I follow the signs at 44 Stanley Avenue, a delightfully urban, industrial-like shopping precinct I always enjoy visiting.



**I'm looking for a shop. I notice a sign: "My blood type is chocolate."
An arrow points left**

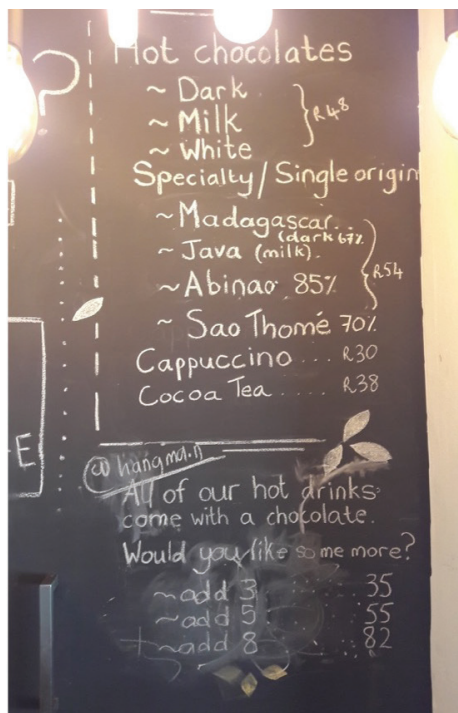
"Oh look, it's chocolate o'clock!" Another arrow points left.

And there, tucked in a corner is a new shop, Chocoloza, where actor and singer Sharon Spiegel Wagner has chosen to meet me. It turns out she loves 44 Stanley Ave as much as I do. "It's innovative and creative, and new and fresh and a little rustic here," she says, greeting me with a wide smile.

Sharon is currently on our TV screens playing a Greek character, Despina Giannopolous, in *Bedford Wives* on SABC3, but she's equally at home on the stage, and that's where I have seen her in roles in *Aspects of Love*, and *Love, Loss and What I Wore*. In person she's all smiles and approachability as I enter Chocoloza with its aroma of chocolate, a chocolate drinks menu on the wall and deep comfortable orange chairs to sink into.

"When I was filming *Bedford Wives* I was here all the time," she smiles. "I'm a chocoholic! I insisted on coming alone though, it gave me a chance to

decompress. I was filming in July, and it was cold. And most of my clothes were revealing and sexy and risqué, so it was a place to warm up. And the light in winter is very beautiful.”



Sharon orders a Madagascar hot chocolate from the menu, which consists of 67% dark chocolate. I marvel at the way it appears on the tray. There's a glass of hot milk, chocolate beans in a separate dish and you stir in your beans, depending on how strong you want it. Included too, are two small chocolates, the exteriors covered in a Pollack-type swirl design and the ganache inside rich and creamy. All Chocoloza's pralines are made with pure Belgian chocolate. You can buy a range of chocolates to take home, and even learn how to make the stuff. There's a workshop at the back, and the shop hosts regular chocolate making evenings. From Granadilla Passion, a white chocolate with zesty granadilla, to Amarula and creamy coffee, or salty tango with salty caramel and macadamian nuts to marzipan and intense 85% chocolate, there's a wide range of chocolates available. Other hot chocolates on offer include white or milk chocolate, or various degrees of dark chocolate from Sharon's Madagascar to Abinao with is up to 75% dark chocolate. The darker the chocolate, the more bitter your drink. You can even order cocoa tea! There's also regular cappuccinos or rooibos and other tea and you can add chocolate to those drinks too.

I ask Sharon for her definition of a special place and she replies: “It's a place where you can feel uninhibited, a place where you can be alone with your thoughts. In rehearsals and on set you're so much in your head. So being here means I could get out of my head. Filming is very technical, the light has to be right, the cameras, you're aware of yourself. I love the stage, you get responses from the audience. In fact, the stage is my second favourite place! Ironically, as most people don't feel comfortable on a stage, but that's where I am most comfortable.”

So comfortable in fact, that her husband arranged to propose to her on stage – not in front of an audience, though! He'd arranged the set-up with the director, getting Sharon onto an empty stage with a light on her, and asked, “Will you be the leading lady in my life?” Two children and some years later, it's obvious what the answer was.

But Sharon is equally at home travelling the world – and reels off a list of places she has been which have touched her soul and senses. From the Midlands where she discovered chocolate pickles and onions in chocolate, as well as cheese in chocolate, all described as “delicious”: “You've got to challenge the senses,” she says, eyes twinkling. To Hong Kong, New Zealand, to touring in Asia, where English wasn't widely spoken, “it's exhilarating to figure out how to do things,” she explains. “I could easily live in Hong Kong for a while,” she says dreamily.

But, for now, home is the stage, and a busy life in Johannesburg as wife, mother to two: “my favourite place is with my kids” as well as when the bright spotlight is falling on her.