

Chocolati in Seattle

Judith van Praag

Pardon me for licking my fingers. I just ate part of the artfully decorated chocolate –J– I received in the mail yesterday, just in time for "Sinterklaas" on the 5th of December. My friend Albert in the Netherlands wanted me to celebrate Saint Nicholas' birthday in style, in far away Seattle. Chocolate is big over there. In 2007 a new museum "De Chocolade Fabriek" (after Willie Wonka's Chocolate Factory) will open –underground– in my old hometown Amsterdam. What can I say?

Many food memories are tied in with tradition. For me it's cheese and chocolate, for most Asian immigrants neither played a role in their upbringing. And perhaps cheese won't ever make the cut (ask Ron Chew of the Wing Luke Asian Museum), but chocolate consumption is –albeit slowly– on the rise.

In 2001 the Asia-Pacific chocolate market reached a value of \$6.3 billion. In 2004 Hong Kong based China Portel Ltd. took a big step, and started to import Houston's "House of Brussels Chocolates", a safe bet when the value of the chocolate market in China is annually increasing by 10 percent.

Still, the average per capita consumption of chocolate in China is still very low (less than 50 grams per person per year against 8 kilograms in Western Europe). But, adopting celebrations from the west, such as Valentine's Day, have made people in Japan and South Korea take a liking to chocolate; they consume 1.4 kilograms per capita. As Asian consumers are acquiring a taste for quality chocolate –formerly known as "black candy"– prices in Asian countries will be lowered, which will effect consumption.

In Seattle one Asian man has embraced chocolate in a big way. At age twenty-four, with a double-major degree in finance

and accounting in his pocket, Christian Wong bought what was known as the "Sutcliff Candy Company" (founded in 1938) and renamed it "Chocolati". With the bravado of the young –imagine a chocolate novice, whose knowledge didn't reach beyond Hershey bars– he jumped in the deep end of the unknown.

On a rainy Saturday afternoon Wong (local reporter Jon Hahn coined "Wong-ka" already) showed me around in his chocolate factory. Monica, the only full-time employee, was brushing rectangular sheets of truffle filling –already set on a crisp bottom layer of chocolate– with another even layer of melted milk chocolate.

Monica is the master chocolate maker at Chocolati. Backed by her knowledge and know-how, Christian Wong was able to enter the realm of chocolate, taking on a daunting task, starting a business in a –for him– previously unknown area of expertise.

"Thanks to Monica, she worked for Sutliff Candy for twenty-five years, I was able to start off right away," said Wong.

Still it was with trial and error that the young businessman created the recipes for his company's truffles. Meanwhile chocolate did its trick. Wong now appreciates the rich flavor of the real thing, so much, that you won't find him eating a "regular" candy bar any more.

I'll say, once you're hooked, you're hooked for good. And after all, there are worse addictions; eaten in moderation, chocolate is good for your health.

Wong opened the door to a cool and dry room where chocolate creations are cured for the next stage. Following the break lines in a triple layered chocolate sheet, he broke off a small square for me to taste. There's a crisp bite to Nordstrom's espresso flavored "Habits", followed by a creamy milk chocolate after

taste. Old time chocolate lovers will recognize the snappy waver, previously created by Sutliff Candy Company; Wong took over the recipe and account.

Diena Wong, the owner's charming mother is a full time volunteer at her son's company's headquarters. The retired Northwest Airlines flight attendant, "42 Years, way too many!", reigns behind the counter of the Aurora wholesale and retail outlet, slipping chocolate covered fortune cookies in individual baggies. In the adjacent production area part time workers –led by full timer Monica– slide special messages in the traditional cookies before dipping them in luscious dark chocolate.

Very much a man of action, Wong races around town in his little green sports car, to deliver fresh truffles to Chocolati Café on Greenwood and 84th, to toss crêpes at his café on Greenlake Drive North (corner of 78th), or to check on the Chocolati coffee cart in the "Washington Mutual" building at First Avenue and Cedar, in Belltown.

For a nearly weightless chocolate present, surprise the chocolate lovers in your life with a Chocolati Gift Card, enabling them to place their own order of "Cocoa Beware", "Mocha Mambo", "Marionberry", or any of the other hand made Chocolati goodies (online at <http://www.chocolati.com>).

As for me, by the time you read this, I'm afraid I'll have finished my –J– and I may have to go score some of that "black candy" at Chocolati myself.

Previously published December 7, 2005 in the International Examiner. © 2005 Judith van Praag. All Rights Reserved.

www.dutchessabroad.com