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NEW JERSEY WEEKLY DESK

## Sweet Talk: Made in New Jersey; Art and Alchemy With Almond Paste

By SUSAN JO KELLER (NYT) 937 words

BERGENFIELD -- CANDY is big business in America. We eat an average of 23.4 pounds of it a year, split almost equally between chocolate and everything else. We buy the most at Halloween, followed closely by Christmas, Easter and Valentine's Day. Last year, American retailers sold \$21.1 billion in candy, \$11.7 billion of it on chocolate alone.

Americans love chocolate, 11.5 pounds a year for each of us. Still, we rank only eighth in the world. The Swiss (no surprise) are No. 1, eating 20.7 pounds a year.

And yes, there is an organization that keeps track of all this: the National Confectioners Association, a trade group in McLean, Va.

Consider what else it knows:

Chocolate manufacturers use 40 percent of the world's almonds and 20 percent of the world's peanuts.

Seventy-one percent of American chocolate-eaters prefer milk chocolate.

The Midwest and the Northeast consume more candy than the South, Southwest, West or Mid-Atlantic states.

Pretty good for something that's not one of the basic food groups. But it's been around so long it might as well be. The Egyptians seem to be the earliest candy makers on record, having used honey to sweeten confections of figs, dates, nuts and spices. The Aztecs made a concoction they called chocolatl, a liquid derived from ground cocoa beans and water. But the big growth in candy making came in the 14th century, when Venetians began importing sugar to sweeten their confections. The cultivation of sugar cane and the use of refined sugar speeded the process. By the 18th century, historians say, candy-making machines were in use.

Yet mass-produced candy isn't the only game in town. For those who are partial to the traditional,

hands-on way of doing things, why buy ready-to-wear when you can still find custom-made chocolate, hard candy or marzipan at a local shop where what you see is made out back -- in the kitchen?

The confectioners' heritage lives on throughout the state, from families who have been making chocolate since the turn of the century to relative newcomers who have spent less than a decade in the trade. Here are some of their stories.

The storefront at 205 South Washington Street is several degrees plainer than nondescript. But what goes on inside is more than a little magical.

A deliveryman wheels in the raw material for the alchemy that takes place here: a trolley stacked high with 100-pound bags of sugar.

It will be transformed, with almond paste and artistry, into golden bananas and red strawberries, thick salami sandwiches and tranquil brown elephants, plump pink pigs and sky-blue Stars of David. (Everything, including the pigs, is kosher, by the way.)

The main artist in residence at Bergen Marzipan and Chocolate Company is Gunter Schott, a native of Stuttgart, Germany, who is matter-of-factly content to let his work speak for itself.

Mr. Schott, trained as a pastry chef, has been making candy for more than 30 years. "In Europe, when you learn the trade, you do that kind of thing," he says.

Some histories of candy making say that marzipan was born of necessity, when bakers were forced to substitute almonds for grain during a famine in Germany in the early 1500's. Others say traders introduced the candy to Germany, bringing it either from Italy, where it was called marci panis, or bread of Marcus, or from Persia, where almond trees were abundant. But even if they did not invent marzipan, it was German candy makers, notably those from the seaport town of Lubeck, who raised it to an elaborate art form.

For three decades, Mr. Schott has carried on the tradition, first managing another company in North Bergen and for the last 11 years running his own business. There's no mistaking what goes on in his workroom for mass production.

Three fist-sized lumps of dough go into a hand-operated press and out come as three perfectly formed piglets -- traditional tokens of good luck for the New Year. It takes 56 pigs to fill a tray, and 16 trays to fill a rack. Families with Scandinavian roots favor the white pigs; those from the rest of Europe generally choose pink.

In both cases, the pigs won't be shipped out until a worker has painted bright blue eyes on each and every one. (The paint is actually food coloring.) Another traditional New Year's favorite, a money man clutching a little gold coin, goes through the paint line three times: for blue eyes, pink cheeks and lips, and a brown-rimmed hat.

Mr. Schott's attention to detail does not extend to extensive sampling of his product. "I don't eat it," he said. "I never was a candy eater. Sure you have to taste it once in a while, but that's it. Some people, they see chocolate, they get all excited. I'm not like that." SUSAN JO KELLER

Bergen Marzipan and Chocolate Company, 205 South Washington Street, Bergenfield. (201) 385-8343. Retail customers are welcome on weekdays when the factory's first shift is running from 6 A.M. to 2:30 P.M. At this time of year and before other big holidays, the retail outlet also has some weekend and evening hours; call ahead.

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