



# THE NEW Candy land

BY MARK CARDWELL

## CONFECTIONERS ARE TWEAKING TRADITIONAL SWEET TREATS TO SUIT NEW CONSUMER TASTES

**W**hen he started working for Purdy's 20 years ago, head chocolatier Gary Mitchell says the company was focused mostly on manufacturing the usual stuff like creams and caramels. But consumer tastes and demand have changed to the point where he now spends much of his time whipping up wild chocolate creations like Himalayan Pink Salt caramels, Almond and Tonka bean chocolates, and Thai Chilli brittle.

"Things are nothing close to being the same old around here," says Mitchell from Purdy's purple headquarters in the heart of Vancouver, B.C. Mitchell creates some 150 new chocolates a year — about a dozen of which will make it into the company's fast-growing chain of stores — in a test kitchen that is also used to shoot commercials and YouTube videos on cooking with chocolate. "They've let me loose in the kitchen," he laughs. "It's exciting [and] I love it."

Sweet and savoury chocolates, and chocolates with unusual combinations and intense flavours are just some of the consumer trends that are currently driving innovation and sales in Canada's multi-billion-dollar confectionery market. And just like in other sectors of the food industry, confectioners are working hard to meet changing demands in a fast-paced, wireless world where consumers with a sweet tooth still want their treats — but want them healthier, more customized, and even with some added health or social-responsibility benefits.

"You have to keep up with the times," says Mitchell. The chocolatier also produces free online e-books on ways to use chocolate in everything from barbecue sauce for ribs or port wine on beef tenderloin, to a strawberry salad with chocolate balsamic vinegar dressing and chocolate rice crispy squares with peanut butter and bacon.

Though Purdy's best seller remains the Hedgehog (smooth hazelnut gianduja filling inside a shell shaped like a hedgehog, a company classic that was developed and introduced a year or two before Mitchell arrived), Mitchell says demand is strong for his fantasy chocolates, as well as for "healthier" Purdy's chocolates like an 88-per-cent cocoa bar, 70-per-cent



cocoa chocolates infused with either goji berries and cocoa nibs or blueberries and almonds, and a 45-per-cent cocoa Ghana milk chocolate bar with dried and toasted shiitake mushroom and Hawaiian Red Sea salt.

That jives with the findings of Euromonitor’s report in December on chocolate confectionery in Canada. In addition to noting a trend “towards planned purchases of chocolate in larger size packaging than singles, increasing sales at the back of stores at a faster rate than impulse/front of store sales, as well as packaging which allowed for use and reuse becoming more popular,” the report found sales of premium chocolate “continued to edge up.”

The 57-page report also found that growth in fair trade and organic chocolate contributed “to an overall rise in value terms. These trends are expected to continue.” Both of these are key issues for an industry that is unique among segments of the Canadian food and beverage manufacturing system in that it is dependent on foreign supplies of its two primary ingredients: sugar and cocoa.

However, one enduring trend that never seems to grow old — and which continues to be a driver for chocolate confectioners — is the joy many people get when they sink their teeth into chocolate. “It’s all about enjoying the moment,” says Laura Secord spokesperson Anne-Émilie Sicard from the company’s manufacturing facility in picturesque Quebec City.

According to Sicard, Laura Secord keeps an eye on trends and “makes decisions every day” on a variety of issues such as health concerns over ingredients like palm oil, ensuring that cocoa farms use acceptable social and fair trade practices, and working with its network of Canadian subcontractors and suppliers to get the most recyclable and eco-friendly packaging possible.

But those issues are all secondary, she adds, to the real reason people buy Laura Secord

chocolates. “They want to experience the pleasure they remember as a kid or from some special occasion like Christmas or Easter,” explains Sicard. That’s why, she adds, people are willing to drive an hour or more to buy a box of chocolates at one of Laura Secord’s 108 stores in seven provinces. “They know they can rely on the same recipe and the same taste from an old-fashioned product that is tied to precious moments with their friends and family. That reality is our world [and] is the bottom line in our business.”

Health concerns, however, are in particular changing the very nature of the confectionery industry in Canada and other developed countries, a trend that has been on the rise since the 2009 recession.

A May 2011 Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada pathfinder report on packaged confectionery trends suggested that the recession caused many consumers to prefer volume over quality, and use confectionery as a reward or means to alleviate stress. “However, sugared gum, milk chocolate tablets and boiled sweets confectionery are all being adversely affected by mounting consumer health concerns,” notes the report. “Obesity and diabetes are major health issues that are increasingly affecting both the young and aging populations.”

When it comes to “healthy” confectionery, the report suggests consumers are now on the prowl for products that benefit dental and cardiovascular health, as well as low-calorie products that help assuage guilt over indulgence. Confectionery, it notes, “has well-established links with healthcare as a delivery format for active ingredients, including nicotine chewing gum for smoking cessation, and medicated confectionery to treat coughs and colds. In recent years, we have seen confectionery and healthcare converge even further. For example, both dietary supplements and digestive remedies are now found in chewable tablet form.” ➔

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That demand is opening doors for new confectionery entrepreneurs like Brendan Kover and Jesse Beaulac of Hamilton, Ont. One morning in 2011, the two 28-year-old friends, athletes and successful businessmen, were sharing a coffee and talking about finding some fun product they could develop together. “I was tired and Jesse offered me a gum, saying too bad you can’t get a boost from gum,” recalls Kover. “A light went on right away.”

In the weeks that followed that eureka moment, the idea evolved from the development of a pick-me-up gum into one of a gum that delivered vitamins. An Internet search revealed that an American company had developed a patented gum just three months earlier that delivered 10 per cent of the recommended daily dose of 12 vitamins in every two pieces. The two contacted the company, tried some samples (“They were great,” says Kover, a life-long gum chewer), then travelled to Pennsylvania and bought the Canadian rights for Vitamingum.



During the two years it took to get Health Canada approval, the pair invested some \$150,000 to develop catchy and self-descriptive bilingual packaging and counter displays. They also did a public relations blitz under the theme “A Healthier Chew,” and notably shot a YouTube commercial filmed in downtown Toronto. They then launched Vitamingum in six retail locations in the GTA in October 2013.

The results have surpassed even Kover’s optimistic expectations. Within four months, all 90,000 packs of Vitamingum that were initially ordered and produced as a private label by Ford Gum in the Buffalo region had been sold. And as new orders roll off the production line, the number of retailers carrying the product in Ontario, where 12-stick packs sell for between \$1.99 and \$2.99, has expanded exponentially with the addition of big retail chain outlets like Petro Canada and 7-Eleven.

“We’re not trying to replace vitamins — that would be crazy,” says Kover, a former university basketball player and law student who dropped out — for now — to develop Vitamingum. “But lots of people don’t have or don’t take the time to eat properly and to get the nutrition they need on a daily basis. So we’re offering gum chewers — even people who don’t chew, but who want the functional health benefits — a healthier chew.” ● ↩

## TRENDS IN FOOD APPLICATIONS

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*In search of the sweet spot*

**By Daniel Scholes**

While some say that men and women have different planetary origins, as sensory researchers we are often asked about the differences between men and women when it comes to tasting evaluations and preferences. And while there are a countless number of taste notes we could use to explore this question, we set our sights on sweetness to find out...do men and women have different "sweet spots?"

**Sweet Talk**

This exploration is based on a recent blind product test conducted among men and women in the Greater Toronto Area, sampling products within the categories of confectionery, snack bars, dairy and beverages. We also analyzed the aggregate data of close to 13,000 individual blind product evaluations over the past three years for 85 different products randomly selected from our database. Our focus



was solely on the consumer attribute of sweetness, and in particular the "Just About Right" scale: a five-point scale where one end point is labelled "much too sweet," the other end point as "not sweet enough," and the middle point is "just right."

**Battle of the Sweetness**

Overall, there was a fairly high degree of "sweet" satisfaction — with 67 per cent of respondents rating the products as just right. This observation was similar among both men and women. However, it was with the remainder of the sample, or the unsatisfied category, that some interesting differences were revealed.

Among those who were unsatisfied with sweetness, it was because the product was too sweet — 60 out of 85 products had a greater leaning to too sweet than not sweet enough. But this leaning was significantly greater among females — with 21.2 per cent rating the products as too sweet — compared to a significantly lower 17.1 per cent of men. And on the other side of the equation, 15.4 per cent of men wanted to up the sweetness, while significantly fewer women (12.4 per cent) wanted the same.

Within the confectionery category, the differences between men and women were even more exaggerated.

**The Short and Sweet of it**

Consistent with these results, scientists have proven that women have more taste buds and generally have a finer sense of taste than men. So for many aspects of a product's flavour profile, males tend to require a greater intensity than women in order to recognize tastes and process their impressions.

Finding the ideal product profile may be an elusive goal, after all, some say that you can't be all things to all men — and the same goes for women. But if you're developing a product which is positioned to appeal more to the palates of your male consumers you may just want to sweeten the deal. ●

Contract Testing Inc. is an industry leader in sensory evaluation and consumer product testing. For questions about this research, or how you can leverage consumer taste buds in your business, contact Dan Scholes at info@contracttesting.com or at (905) 456-0783.

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