

Belgium chocolates are changing

BRUSSELS, BELGIUM: Belgium is rightly proud of its status as a producer of some of the world's finest chocolate but changing tastes and new markets in Asia and the Arab world are shaking up its chocolate production.

"Belgian traditional chocolates? Some people still do them really well, such as the major brands," said Laurent Gerbaud, one of the new generation of chocolatiers trying to keep up with a discerning clientele.

In his workshop in the centre of Brussels, a customer will find few traces of the Manon, the praline filled with coffee-flavoured cream that's covered in white chocolate and has been the industry mainstay for decades.

Gerbaud instead offers small chocolates made with exotic and unusual flavourings -- figs from Izmir in Turkey, the bitter berries of the Barberry tree, Cape pears or Yuzu, a citrus fruit from Japan.

"My priority is clear, simple flavours, using the best ingredients possible. My chocolates use less sugar and fat in response to increasing demand," Gerbaud said.

Such chocolates with a bitter and sharp edge were first made in France in the 1990s as artisan chocolatiers came onto the scene.

In Belgium, the trend has been slower to get off the ground in an industry dominated by such illustrious names as Leonidas, Godiva, Cote d'Or or Neuhaus.

But that is beginning to change, with new brands coming through, even if progress is slow and Belgium's some 400 artisan chocolatiers remain wary of getting carried away.

"It is extremely difficult to establish a brand, to build up a clientele and to be profitable. After 11 years, I still do not have profits," says Gerbaud.

For the established brands, the challenge is different, needing to find new markets if they are to expand beyond their home base.

Leonidas was founded after the 1913 International Exhibition by Leonidas Kestekides, a Greek pastry maker who decided to settle in Belgium and the company is using the 100th anniversary celebrations to update its offering.

Kestedides' descendants still run the business, with the Leonidas brand known worldwide through some 1,300 outlets in 50 countries, selling 6,000 tons a year or one million chocolates a day.

"It is clear that our potential for development lies more in the emerging economies than in the mature market here in Europe," said Hugues Moens, commercial director for Leonidas.

China, already home to 40 Leonidas shops, and the Arab world are now the priority for the company.

In Belgium, as in France, with some 350 shops in each country, Leonidas has to find the right balance between tradition and innovation so as to keep its old customers and attract new ones.

"We do not forget that our success is based on the loyalty of customers who hold to traditional chocolates such as the Manon, our best-seller," said Claude Seneque, master chocolatier at the company.

To attract new customers, to cater for changing tastes, Leonidas must also have something for those who find the brand "a little old-fashioned", according to Pauline Vervoort from Brussels.

So as part of its anniversary celebrations, Leonidas has made new pralines, smaller and even more chocolate packed, and plans to spruce up its shops.

"In Belgium, to succeed in chocolate is harder and harder. You have to be tough but also creative all the time," Gerbaud says.

Source: *AFP* via I-Net Bridge

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