

A rectangular button with a red 'x' icon and the text "Print This Article".

Tuesday, Mar 31, 2009

Posted on Mon, Mar. 30, 2009

At candy stores, sweet relief for tough times

By ANNA M. TINSLEY

atinsley@star-telegram.com

Cindy Bean looked at barrel after barrel filled to the top with candy, searching for just one thing: Hot Tamales.

With a grin, the 56-year-old said chewing the spicy candy is her not-so-secret addiction, a way to help her deal with the stresses of everyday life.

"I used to worry about the sugar and weight gain," said Bean, who lives in Sherman and recently visited the Candy Barrel in the Fort Worth Stockyards. "But with everything going on in the world, there are some things in life that give me joy. I get a lot of relaxation eating Hot Tamales."

As the recession labors on — with rising unemployment and home foreclosures, bank instability and a leery stock market — many are finding at least a temporary relief in candy. Maybe it's the sugar rush; maybe it's a reminder of childhood and easier times.

Either way, some candy stores say they aren't losing business as they feared they would. Some are even having a hard time keeping certain items in stock.

At the Candy Barrel, workers were stocking barrels holding "nostalgic candy" — including the Chic-O-Sticks, Mary Janes, Tootsie Rolls, Pixy Stix, Bit-O-Honeys and Necco Wafers many adults grew up eating.

"We are running out of that candy," said Martin Munoz, assistant manager. "Not from the kids. Grown-ups are buying it."

"Adults become kids when they come in here."

Sweet industry

For a while, traditional treats such as Hershey's Kisses were being left behind as consumers dabbled in specialty items such as gourmet truffles, said Edgar Roesch, a food analyst with New York investment firm Soleil Securities.

But now, candy lovers seem to be returning to their roots, with the Hershey Co. seeing a 45 percent increase in profit for 2008 and Nestle landing a 69 percent increase, reports show.

At candy stores from San Francisco to New York, workers have dipped into inventory they hadn't expected to and have increased orders. Some say they even know of customers who include candy in their personal budgets.

Through good economic times and bad, consumers have been true to their candy love.

During the Great Depression in the 1930s, the nickel chocolate bar was in great demand. And it was during the Depression when candy companies began creating treats, such as Snickers and Tootsie Pops, that are still popular today.

The enduring attraction to these candies may be why people still turn to them at stressful times.

"There clearly is a sense of anxiety and, in some quarters, panic and fear out there because of the economy," said James Campbell Quick, a management professor at the University of Texas at Arlington and a psychologist who is known as an expert on stress. "One of the places people turn to is food to reduce anxiety."

There is, he said, a benefit to small amounts of chocolate at a time. And chewy favorites — Tootsie Rolls, Starburst, even gum — could have some benefit as well.

"There is actually some good evidence around about chewing as a stress-management technique," Quick said.

'It's a comfort'

Even some higher-end candy stores — such as Schokolad Chocolate Factory in downtown Fort Worth — are seeing an increase in sales over last year.

Customers seem to be buying fewer of the large items, such as molds, baskets and boxes of chocolate that generally sell between \$50 and \$100. But they are picking up more of the \$15 to \$30 chocolate sets, as well as pieces of dark chocolate and the always popular chocolate-dipped strawberries, said Lindsey Owens, store owner.

Maybe buying a treat at a European-style chocolate shop such as this is a bit of a luxury at a time when luxuries are increasingly hard to come by.

"It's not too expensive, and it's a comfort for people," Owens said. "Anything that makes people feel good, especially at a time when the economy is like this, is good."

This report includes material from *The New York Times*.