

Art is in the coating of chocolate treasures

By Connie L. Sheehan
Senior Editor

I opened the door, and the most heavenly scent on earth permeated the air — chocolate.

And it was everywhere. All sizes, shapes and kinds. No wonder I was as excited as Charlie on his legendary trip through Willy Wonka's chocolate factory.

Katrinka Schnabel, vice president of Sugar Plum Candies, 333 N. Cotner Blvd, pulled me in from the morning snow and into the corner shop that houses the hand-dipping kitchens of Josephine Krick Chocolates.

My attention was torn between the perfectly stacked trays of hand-made candies on the left and the three women bustling over several counters on the right.

Katrinka introduced herself and then ushered me over to meet the crew, Kitty Lekai, Lola Ring and Jean Johnson, the women whose dipped creations adorned the shelves.

Katrinka brings 30 years of merchandising experience to Sugar Plum Candies. Her major in college was English, and she says it was just an accident that sent her into the candy industry with a job as assistant candy buyer for an exclusive Philadelphia department store.

Kitty distracted me from the introductions as she swirled a truffle center in a tub of melted chocolate and, with a twist of her wrist, deposited the coated delicacy on a covered tray.

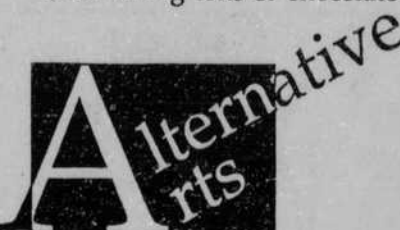
Kitty, who has hand dipped for 20 years, has dipped both one-handed and two-handed. The difference, Kitty says, is two people being able to produce in one day what takes four people one week to dip one-handed.

Lola has 40 years of experience, both as a hand-dipper and as an instructor, and is positive that she has "taught half of Lincoln" the art. She also demonstrates newly purchased dipping machines, invented by owner Clive Hilgert, to buyers over the United States and Canada.

Jean specialized in dipping clus-

ters the last seven years but, according to Katrinka, soon will be learning how to dip all the store specialties.

The women hand dip an average of 150 pounds of candy a day for this shop and its two other locations: the downtown Skywalk level shop at 1201 O St. and the Penn Station location in New York. After eating tons of chocolate



all these years in blissful ignorance, I was ready to begin my formal chocolate education — but, first, a few basics.

One of the worst places for chocolates is your refrigerator, Katrinka explained. Not only does "chocolate absorb odors like a sponge" but the humidity is too high. Chocolates should be eaten at 70 to 72 degrees since the texture and flavor will be at its peak.

"It's also a fallacy that you can only get fine chocolate in Europe," Katrinka said about the chocolate used as the coating for the hand-dipped pieces.

Wonderful chocolate is available in the United States, Katrinka said, and each major chocolate-maker may produce more than 100 different grades of chocolate.

"We happen to buy the very best (grade) from the manufacturer that we use," she said, adding that the maker was located in California.

According to Katrinka, making candy for three stores requires about 500 pounds of dipping chocolate per month, and Christmas holidays may demand up to 1,500 pounds.

Katrinka explained how the manufacturers end up with three final products after the beans are processed: chocolate liqueur, which is not actually alcoholic, cocoa powder and cocoa butter. The ingredients then are recombined

in various ratios to produce different grades of chocolate.

The dipping chocolate is not purchased, however, for its taste alone but for how it relates to the centers that one plans to use it on, Katrinka said.

"If you have a real sticky sweet center, which we don't make, then you might want a more bitter chocolate to offset it," Katrinka said. "But since we make true flavor centers, we needed a chocolate that would blend with what we were doing, not overpower it but complement it."

Katrinka slid the case open and appeared with a raspberry cream dipped in dark chocolate. A nibble revealed a rose-pink cream so fresh that a few small seeds still remained within the fruit center. The blend was balanced — the center somewhat tart, and the dark chocolate not as bitter as many I've had.

I was dubious as she handed over a vanilla cream, one of the last pieces usually left in my candy box at home. Yet, it wasn't the over-vanilla flavored goo I normally neglected; it tasted like my grandmother's old-fashioned butter cream icing wrapped in chocolate.

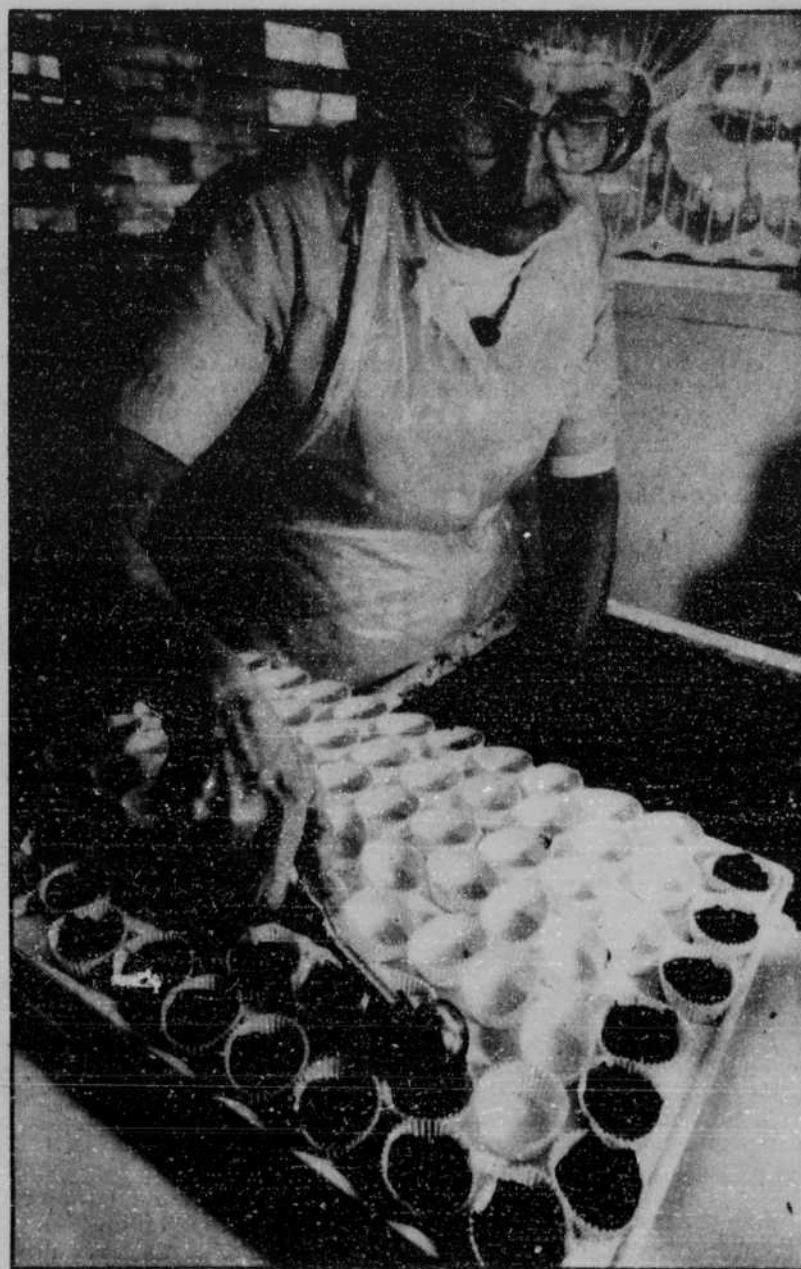
Wondering about the truffles I'd seen Kitty dipping earlier, I inquired about such exotic names as Champagne, Amaretto, Grand Marnier, Bailey's Irish Cream, Rum Jamaica, Kalua, Double Chocolate and Chocolate Mousse.

Katrinka confirmed that original flavorings are combined with chocolate, whipped cream and butter, but any alcohol content evaporates during the heating process.

While we talked, Kitty still dipped one variety after another — first truffles, followed by nut clusters, then almond bark.

Katrinka said an experienced dipper knows by feel if the chocolate temperature is correct in the warmed pot.

"Occasionally, as good as these girls are, they get streaks (in the dipping chocolate) because the chocolate we use is so good that it's very delicate," she added.



William Lauer/Daily Nebraskan

Kitty Lekai, official dipper for Sugar Plum Candies, makes coconut clusters. Lekai said the other dippers tried to take her job away but "I said no way."

Kitty took a few moments to demonstrate the secret code of squiggles put on the top of the chocolates to indicate their type: p for peanut butter, r for raspberry or v for vanilla, to name a few.

"The position of the fingers when the girl lifts her hand off the chocolate determines the mark on the chocolate," Katrinka explained.

All the women agreed that hand dipping seems to be a dying art. That's too bad, Katrinka said, because one can't get the same taste or looks with machinery

chocolates. "You never get completely away from it. Once you learn about the candy, it's always on your mind," Jean said.

Although she's had other jobs, Jean admits that every once in a while, thoughts about dipping pop up in her mind.

"It's a skill, an art, and you learn it," Jean said. "It's just like you were a painter, you might go and do something else, but it would still be in your mind."

Foreign

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he can get almost all of his food in Lincoln, but "seafood is hard to get here."

Han said one dish he enjoys is boiled rice with kimchi, a spicy pickled dish made mainly from cabbage and garlic. Another of his favorites is dried seafood.

Shek-Tak Tang, an actuarial science graduate student from Taiwan, said he cooks mostly Chinese food.

"I like chicken, beef and vegetables," he said, "along with pork, served with either rice or noodles."

He said one store in Lincoln gets a fresh supply of seafood every Wednesday.



Wine

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All unusual European wines aren't necessarily expensive, Stoehr said. The Romania wine, Premiat and the Hungarian wine, Trakia, are moderately priced.

Stoehr said they're not expensive compared to Rothschild wines, but they are very good ethnic wines. Other ethnic wines include the Chilean wines, Santa Rita and Walnut Crest. Some American vineyards are establishing vineyards in the Chili region because the soil gives the grape such a different flavor, Stoehr said.

"Wines that are really hot and really starting to pick up in the

United States are Australian wines," Stoehr said.

Stoehr said Australian wines like Black Opal and Black Marlin brands aren't expensive, and they're still considered exotic because they're relatively new to the United States and especially new to the Lincoln area.

Black Marlin blend comes from three varieties of grapes and has a semi-dry taste with an added smoothness, Stoehr said.

"It's a fantastic wine," he said.

American wines don't tend to be very exotic, Stoehr said, with the exception of Opus One, a combined effort of the Robert Mondavi vineyard in America and Baron de Philippe de Rothschild's French vineyard.

"They got together, and their goal was to make the ultimate wine," Stoehr said. "A retailer cannot just call up one week and have somebody send a case, it's preordered with signed delivery only."

The Wine Spectator, a rating booklet, has consistently ranked Opus One '97 on a scale of 100 points. The bottle retails for \$69.95, Stoehr said.

I asked Stoehr to show me the best exotic champagne for special occasions.

Of course I expected the name to be Dom Perignon, but I didn't expect the 1982 selection to be \$88.99 a bottle or about \$889 a case.

Well, perhaps I should rethink my budget for my graduation party.