



**A TURTLE BY ANY
OTHER NAME —
RIVERTOWN
CHOCOLATE
SHOPS**

Story and photos by Pamela Eyden

The rich scent of chocolate wafts through the air as you open the door to Lagomarcino's in downtown Moline, Ill. The old-fashioned soda and chocolate shop is furnished with mahogany booths, stained glass lampshades and a long soda bar with stools. Have you stepped back in time? Sort of. The family's been making and selling handmade chocolates here since Angelino and Luigia, immigrants from northern Italy, bought the building in 1908.

Downtown was bustling then, with seven theaters nearby. After the shows, people came looking for chocolate and ice cream. The growing family lived above the store.

"Whenever they got too busy in

the shop, they'd bang on the pipes to call people down to help," said Tom Lagomarcino.

Lagomarcino's became a Quad Cities tradition for five generations and counting. People come here to celebrate everything from true love to national holidays. They come for the pecan dainties (also known as turtles), English toffee, sea salt caramels, home-made ice cream, hot fudge sundaes and more.

Now, five family members — siblings Tom, Lisa and Beth; and Beth's daughter Katie and son Daniel — work alongside 20 employees, a number that swells to 35 in the fall, when they gear up for caramel apples and Christmas.

Dozens of fillings are made by hand in the basement of the Moline store.

"We make the English toffee, sponge candy and caramels in a big old copper kettle," Tom said. "Sponge candy is difficult to make. It can drive a candy maker nuts. If the humidity is wrong it turns into a big gob of goo."

Good sponge candy (also known as fairy food), which is enrobed in chocolate, is brittle yet fragile to bite into.

Dipping and finishing are done in the second Lagomarcino's store across the river in Davenport, Iowa, which also has a café. First, chocolate has to be tempered — heated to a melting point, then cooled, then heated again and cooled again as fine shavings of hard chocolate are added. This crystallizes the liquid, making it hard enough to work with.



Inside seating at Lagomarcino's looks much like soda shops did years ago. Opposite page: Tom Lagomarcino prepares trays of turtles in the Davenport store.



Chocolate eggs filled with pecan dainties and toffee get decorated with swirls at Lagomarcino's.

"If it's not tempered right, it doesn't harden and doesn't have the sheen of fine chocolate," Tom explained.

Dipping was once done entirely by hand by Tom's aunt, who loved the job. Now a small machine runs morsels of filling on a small conveyor belt through a "curtain of chocolate." After the belt vibrates to shed the excess, a gloved worker dips a finger in the vat of chocolate and swirls a symbol on each piece.

"That lets you know what's inside. Otherwise, you have to bite a hole in the bottom to find out," Tom said with a smile.

Since 1908, dark chocolate has become more popular. Another change came about seven years ago, when Tom's son brought salted caramels home from a trip to Louisville.

"I thought that was just silly. Who'd want salt on their chocolate covered caramel?" Tom recalled. "I was very wrong about that. Now we get calls for it, even after hours, from people who just have to have it. One fellow called and said he was in the dog house with his wife, could I please open up the

store for him to buy some. Our caramel is really wonderful."

Another change in the world of chocolate is that it's become harder to maintain a relationship with the people who make the chocolate from cocoa beans. Many of the old companies have been bought by conglomerates. Today,

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three companies control more than half of the world's cocoa processing: Cargill, Olam and Barry Callebaut. Six companies dominate the next phase, the manufacturing of chocolate: Mars, Ferrero-Rocher, Mondelez, Meiji, Hershey and Nestle. Only a small percentage of all chocolate goes to produce fine chocolate, like that sold in Lago-

marcino's, and only 0.5 percent comes from "fair trade" sources.

Lagomarcino's now buys all its chocolate (bittersweet and milk) from the Guittard Company of France, a family-owned firm that sources its beans from specific "fair-trade" plantations, which means that plantations and workers are paid fairly and no child labor is involved.

"The future of chocolate is very interesting," Tom said.

Chocolate is made from the fruit of cacao trees, *Theobroma cacao*, (pronounced "kuh-cow"), which are grown mostly on small farms near the equator. "Theobroma" is Greek for "food of the gods."

Chocolate Escape

If you want to know about chocolate — where it comes from, how it's made and what its benefits are — visit the Chocolate Escape in downtown Wabasha, Minn. Owner Brian Yenter will happily explain. Customers who don't know the difference between candy bar chocolate and fine chocolate are offered



Above: These Chocolate Escape turtles are made with cashews, milk chocolate and dark chocolate.

Right: Brian Yenter dips chocolate confections behind the candy counter.



Among the handmade chocolates displayed in long glass cases are a variety of “Brian’s Endangered Turtles.”

Eagle Center. A hand-painted mural on the wall illustrates the story of chocolate from tree to confection. Cocoa beans, cocoa butter and cocoa paste are mounted in clear plexiglass boxes, museum-style, attached to the wall.

Among the handmade chocolates displayed in long glass cases are a variety of “Brian’s Endangered Turtles.” These familiar confections are usually made of pecans, under a dollop of caramel and a cape of chocolate. Brian’s California Turtle has coconut in it. The Desert Turtle includes a dash of chili pepper. Others are made with cashews or almonds.

Yenter fashions these and other confections at a series of tables behind the candy counter, so he can keep an eye on the store while he works. He also sells specialty chocolate bars from the sustainable plantations of Michel Clouizel, and serves ice cream at café tables in a room that lets river light shine in.

Red Wing Confectionery

At the Red Wing Confectionery, in downtown Red Wing, Minn., turtles are known as “bear claws.” The business has been at this location for 30 years, in a row of brick buildings half a block from the St. James Hotel, although it’s had a succession of four owners. Leon and Donna Nesbitt are the current owners.

“All of the previous owners still come in to get chocolate,” said manager Jessica Stemen.

Leon comes in to manage the cash register, but doesn’t work with the candy.

“We don’t want him in the kitchen,” Stemen laughed.

This tidy operation produces an amazing array of confections, including bear claws, peanut butter cups, mint melt-



The Red Wing Confectionery makes and sells their creations in a store on Main Street.



Candies at Red Wing Confectionery are individually wrapped by hand.

aways and English toffee. Windows onto the kitchen allow customers to watch workers stir, cut, dip, decorate and wrap the candy. Three people are trained to make the candies. Ten others package the candy.

Jessica said it took her six months to master the skills to make the chocolates on equipment that has been passed

“People who make chocolates tend to be really helpful, not competitive.”
— Drew Siegert, Betty Jane’s

down through the decades: how to make caramel in the big copper kettle; how to heat, temper and blend chocolates; how to coat cubes of caramel in liquid chocolate and drop them on a tray with a flick of her wrist, so each little square has a symbol on it to indicate its contents.

“Dipping a candy in chocolate and having it look good are two different things,” she laughed.

Red Wing Confectionery uses different kinds of milk chocolate and dark chocolate, and mixes them to order, to make the chocolate thicker or thinner.



Above: Drew Siegert's family bought Betty Jane's from its long-time owners.

Chocolate comes from Blommer Chocolate in Chicago, which was the oldest and largest independent chocolate bean processor in North America until Fuji Oil of Japan recently took it over.

Betty Jane's Homemade Candies

Downriver at Betty Jane’s Homemade Candies in Dubuque, Iowa, turtles are known as “gremlins.”

Drew Siegert’s family bought Betty Jane’s three years ago from its long-time owners. Siegert said he learned a lot from the owners and from other small chocolate candy makers, such as Lagomarcino’s.

“People who make chocolates tend to be really helpful, not competitive,” he said.

Betty Jane’s hasn’t changed its recipes for 80 years.

“Customers would notice. They’d say, ‘Hey, you just changed my whole childhood!’” Siegert explained.



Betty Jane's Gremlins are known in some parts as turtles.

Betty Jane’s sells chocolate at its two stores in Dubuque, and one in Cedar Rapids. The Dubuque store on Asbury Street, near the University of Dubuque, is bright and open.

Chocolates dwell in spacious splendor. Changes in marketing and packaging have brought the company significant growth, Siegert said. Betty Jane’s Candies are sold at 100 Sam’s Clubs and by wholesalers across the country.

Packaged in a sack, “Gremlin Snackers” cost less than they would in a traditional candy box. Formed into a bar, the Gremlin candy bar is a bigger snack. It won a place in the swag bags given out at the 2014 Academy Awards.

Betty Jane’s also sources its chocolate from the Blommer Company in Chicago, which is where Siegert began his career. He returned to his hometown of Dubuque to take over the chocolate business and raise a family.

“I have two sons, one and three. I’ll put them to work here in a few years,” he laughed. 🍫

Pamela Eyden is editor-at-large. Her last story for Big River was “Not So Common Carp,” March-April 2020.