



CHARLES AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANITA CHU

If, like legions of chocoholics everywhere, you thought of Willy Wonka's chocolate factory as one of the most marvelous places ever dreamed up, you ought to know that a real-life version exists: Charles Chocolates' retail store and candy kitchen in Emeryville.

Charles Siegel, president and CEO of Charles Chocolates, is himself as charming, affable, and devoted to chocolate as the candy maker in the beloved children's book. While giving a tour of the newly finished candy kitchen, Siegel enthuses about the possibilities his expanded production space offers him to experiment more with chocolate, and his hopes of illuminating the chocolate-making process by opening the kitchen to the public.

"I really want customers to see what goes into the process of making our chocolates, to understand what we mean when we say everything is made by hand," says Siegel. All of his chocolates are handmade by his workers in small batches; there is no huge warehouse full of candy since everything is made to order and shipped out within a few days. Looking through the soaring glass windows into the kitchen, one can see white-clad workers making blood orange marmalade on the stove, pouring hot caramel into frames to be cut later with a guitar, or wrapping chocolate bars individually in foil. Everything is clean, efficient, and precise, just as Siegel likes it.

So much of the experience of premium chocolate is tied to appreciation of the finished product, be it the fine glossy sheen of a chocolate bar, the perfect smooth roundness of a truffle, or the delicate crisp give of a chocolate shell as you bite through to the ganache. By letting customers see the time and care that goes into his creations, Siegel hopes they can learn what it means to produce a quality product.

Siegel has several pastry chefs overseeing production in his kitchen, all of them with extensive backgrounds in the food industry. A fixture of the Bay Area chocolate scene, Siegel started his first chocolate company, Attivo Confections, 25 years ago and then changed his focus to freelance chocolate consulting. However, the lure of making his own chocolate inspired him to set up shop once again. His expertise and experience serve him well; there is a surety and focus to his work.

"Chocolate is all about pleasure," Siegel says, and all his chocolates are created around this principle. He is not interested in trendy, shocking new flavors of the moment, and confesses that he might ignore suggestions for new products. His own long experience journeying with chocolate has led him to follow his own instincts, and the results are pleasurable indeed.

Siegel's classic collection of chocolates includes plump chocolate hearts filled with ganaches of raspberry and passionfruit, luxurious chocolate caramels, elegant truffles flavored with Kahlúa and lavender and honey, and adorable butterflies filled with peanut praline. He uses a mix of chocolates from El Rey, Guittard and Cacao Barry to get the right nuances of cacao to match the filling. A must-try is the mojito heart, which has a filling of mint and lime ganache splashed with rum. It's as close to the real drink as you can get without visiting a bar.

The most exotic of his new products is a collection of chocolates infused with various Asian teas from Teance Fine Teas of Berkeley. The combinations offer some one-of-a-kind flavors, ranging from delicate (jasmine) to earthy (oolong). Siegel explains that each tea is paired with a different blend of chocolates to achieve a perfect harmony in taste. The lychee and osmanthus truffles are a particular delight; satisfying smooth squares adorned with calligraphic characters that melt in the mouth into floral, complex richness.



One of Charles Chocolates' signature items, the colorful edible chocolate boxes that hold more chocolates inside, was actually born out of necessity. At one point his supplier was unable to deliver enough packaging for Siegel's chocolates, so he decided to make his own boxes out of chocolate. This brainstorm has turned into a trademark. New designs for new collections are constantly coming out, including a lid for the tea chocolates inspired by Chinese watercolors, and a pretty floral pastel for the spring collection.

Siegel's candy output isn't confined solely to great chocolates; he also makes some stellar *pâte de fruit*. His wine-infused versions of the French fruit candies are swoon-worthy; they taste like perfect distillations of the grape. Siegel uses wines from Artesa Winery in Napa to make his little hemispheres of bliss—the Gewürztraminer and Champagne flavors are light and sweet, the Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon delectably intense.

The Charles Chocolates retail store is a sleek little space, with boxes of chocolates seeming to hover on glass shelves backed by stylish brick walls. Dominating the center of the room is the candy case, where all of Siegel's confections are artfully displayed and ready to be snapped up by the piece or in a box. Just around the corner is the seating area before the kitchen; customers can relax with coffee and a piece of chocolate and watch workers industriously making more candy. There is a hypnotic pull to the sight of workers stirring a huge pot of caramel flecked with fleur de sel, or operating the enrobing machine that covers each piece of candy in a perfect embrace of tempered chocolate. The experience creates a connection between chocolate and consumer; this is no piece of mass-produced sugary fluff, but a confection made just yards away, with an ephemeral shelf life, meant to be savored while it is fresh and new.

Furthering its café aspirations, Charles Chocolates also serves its own house hot chocolate alongside Blue Bottle coffee, and offers homemade pastries and ice cream. "We really want to make this place into a destination spot," Siegel says. He has created a guided tour of the kitchen to satisfy the public's quest for knowledge of the chocolate-making process and offers the place for private tasting events. His passion for chocolate and educating the public is evident; Siegel happily talks to the curious visitor about the ingredients he uses and the process behind his products. "I don't believe in keeping secrets in worry of others taking them," he says. "It's as much a matter of practice as knowledge, so even if someone knew everything that went into one of my chocolates, he would still have to be able to do it himself."

Siegel's generosity of spirit extends to the entire and expanding field of quality chocolate making.

"Any time someone buys high-quality chocolate, whether it's Scharffen Berger or Michael Recchiuti, it's a good thing for me, because it means it is another person that is willing to learn about fine chocolate and to try the good stuff."

But what Siegel gives us, besides a fantastic addition to the Bay Area's long tradition of local chocolate, is a chance to feel like wide-eyed Charlie Bucket in a sweet, wondrous fantasyland. 🍫

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