

A healthy candy revolution

S BY TREENA HEIN

ugar, sugar, sugar. It's certainly on the minds of most Canadians when they reach for a snack or a treat. Traditional candy obviously contains a lot of it, which is driving companies to rethink their formulations. "Consumers are increasingly opting for healthy indulgence options...and industry participants strived in 2014 to bring in product improvement and innovation to meet the demand in this regard," says Frank Jiang, Euromonitor's Canadian confectionery research lead.

There are two main natural sweeteners that are making steady progress in replacing sugar in many candy products. One of these is xylitol, and its use in confections has soared over the past five years, according to Xylitol Canada vice-president Matt Willer. Xylitol is a natural sugar substitute derived from fruits and vegetables. It has the same exact sweetness, look and feel as table sugar, but with 40 per cent fewer calories. It's safe for diabetics and provides substantial oral health benefits.

"Today you have people avoiding sugar and avoiding chemical sweeteners, so use of natural sugar substitutes, including xylitol, have skyrocketed and will continue to do so," Willer explains. "Xylitol, being the easiest to use and the cavity preventer, has

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lent itself to become one of the more popular in candy.” Xylitol is now found in major candy brands such as Ice Breakers, Mentos, Ice Chips and Trident. The candy lineup of Xylitol Canada’s brand Xyla includes lollipops, gum, hard candy, mints and taffy (the company also offers jam, condiments and more), available at Whole Foods, Sobeys, London Drugs and many other retail outlets.

Increasing xylitol candy sales are challenged by the fact that right now the cost is higher and the product availability is lower compared to traditional products. However, Willer notes that awareness and acceptance of xylitol continues to reach all-time highs, and that this is in part due to support from the dental community. Xylitol has received positive support in *The Journal of The American Dental Association* and from the Harvard School of Dental Medicine. In addition, researchers state in a recent paper published in *The Journal of The American Geriatrics Society* that xylitol gum can provide a “real clinical benefit” in terms of several oral health issues that commonly affect many seniors. Xylitol reverses the destructive effects of sugar on oral health. It cannot be converted to acids by oral bacteria, and it also generates an alkaline environment that inhibits plaque formation. With proper use, xylitol actually stops the tooth

decay process, and long-term use increases the buffering capacity and protective factors in saliva. It even has the ability to enhance re-mineralization of the enamel.

Extracts from the stevia plant are the other natural sweetener making substantial inroads into the candy category worldwide. The International Stevia Council states that hundreds of new products are being launched each year made with stevia extracts, across a wide range of countries. The European Stevia Association explains on its website that stevioside (a stevia extract) is extremely heat stable, and is compatible with dairy products and with acidic fruits such as berries, oranges and pineapples. “Moreover, it is pH stable, non-fermentable and does not darken upon cooking, and therefore it has a wide range of applications in food products.”

Stevia and xylitol can also be found in chocolate, with stevia bars offered by companies such as Dante Confections of Massachusetts, Coco Polo of New Jersey and Lily’s Sweets in



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Seattle, Wash. Xylitol chocolate is made by such firms as Michigan's Dr. Johns and Chocologic in Connecticut.

For the big chocolate players, however, the present focus seems to be the use of more natural ingredients rather than sugar replacement. Nestlé has already removed artificial colours and flavours from some of its most popular products such as Smarties and Aero bars, and is committed to removing these ingredients from the few products that contain them by the end of 2016, if not sooner, says Nestlé Canada Corporate Affairs representative Maria Serraino. "Nestlé USA," she adds, "is committed to removing artificial



The firm has also shown interest in "going natural" through its recent purchase of Illinois-based Enjoy Life Foods, which has marketed a variety of "free-from" baked goods and confections in Canada since

2005. They are found in major grocery store chains in the gluten-free section. In 2014, the company's overall sales of chocolate bars increased by a whopping 67 per cent over 2013, and Chocolate Morsels by 72 per cent, due to increased distribution but also due to what chief marketing officer Joel Warady identifies as a demand for better-for-you snacking. "We believe products are better for you if they are 'free-from' many unhealthy things," he says. "We are free-from gluten, the top 12 Canadian allergens, GMO and all artificial ingredients."

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flavours and FDA-certified colours like Red 40 and Yellow 5, from all of its chocolate candy products." For example, in the Butterfinger bar, these two artificial colours will be replaced by annatto, made from the seeds of the achiote tree.

Across North America, the Hershey Company is also striving to use only natural content in its chocolate, such as roasted almonds and cocoa beans. This "simple ingredients" effort is one of three guiding principles that the company began implementing in 2013. Transitioning more products to a simplified ingredient list will continue this year, says Brandy Woolford, associate manager of Brand Public Relations and Consumer Engagement, with treats such as Hershey's Kisses Milk Chocolates. The other two Hershey guiding principles are "transparency" and "thoughtful and responsible sourcing," for example, moving to 100-per-cent certified and sustainable cocoa.

Mondelez, which makes Cadbury chocolate, has stated that it is working to reduce saturated fat content in some of its offerings.

With regard to soy, Warady says recent studies have shown some potential health issues in people who consume a lot of it. "Add to that the fact that in America, 90 per cent of all soy is GMO and you find that soy has become an ingredient that people look to remove from products," he says. "Most chocolate in the market contains soy lecithin as an emulsifier; we produce our chocolate without any soy, which makes for a cleaner ingredient deck, and a more pure chocolate product." Warady admits it is significantly more expensive to create chocolate without the use of soy, but notes that customers are willing to pay more for premium offerings. "When people taste our Chocolate Morsels or bars, they say it tastes like real chocolate," he explains. "They eat our Chocolate Morsels right out of the bag, so while they're now in the baking aisle in a large bag, we see an opportunity to have them in the snack aisle in smaller-size bags." Enjoy Life Foods already sells its Chocolate Morsels to some major food brands for use as an ingredient, and says it is positioned to increase this market substantially in 2015.

In addition to seeing more natural ingredients and sugar substitutes, candy consumers should also expect more health-boosting additives. "In particular," Jiang notes, "medicated confectionery and sugar confectionery fortified with medical ingredients such as amino acids and vitamins are likely to become more available in candy aisles."

Willer at Xylitol Canada agrees. "You will see more value-added candy, you will see more natural candy, and you will see more functional candy," he says. "The good news is xylitol can be used in any of these categories." Enjoy Life Foods is also interested in functional ingredients such as antioxidants and protein.

Whatever may come in the candy aisle, expect it to be better than ever for you — and, without a doubt, to still be sweet. ●





For the love of chocolate!

Nowadays, you can find chocolate in any form and mixed with the most interesting flavour partners — sweet and savoury, intensely spicy, fruit and nutty, and organic are just some of the consumer trends that are currently driving innovation and sales in Canada’s multi-billion-dollar confectionery market.

We recently embarked on our own test of love in this category, to see whether six popular brands of plain milk chocolate equally tug at our heart strings.

Blind date

We asked 50 lucky females from the Greater Toronto Area who regularly consume chocolate to taste and evaluate six brands of plain milk chocolate. This array included two premium brands and one private-label brand. Each respondent tasted one square or piece of each bar.

And because most chocolate brands have embossed branding on each piece of chocolate, respondents were blindfolded to avoid easy brand identification.

The love story

For the most part, all the chocolate samples were equally “lovable.” Five of our six contenders had no significant differences on measures of overall liking, purchase intent, overall flavour, or overall texture.

Only one of the six test products failed to impress, scoring significantly lower than all the other brands on most key measures including overall liking of both the flavour and texture. The main point



of difference was that this bar severely lacked the milky flavour and creamy texture that consumers expect in a milk chocolate. This was not a product with melt in mouth qualities — in fact the lack of “melt” was the largest contributing factor to the bar’s dismal performance.

Higher love

Most of our chocolate lovers (68 per cent) were purchasers of both everyday chocolate bars and premium-priced chocolate bars. When asked about the perceived benefits of buying premium chocolate they said the most important benefit by a large margin was because it has a richer flavour.

Taking a closer look at the performance of the two premium brands in our test, surprisingly neither stood apart as having significantly better quality, texture or flavour. Neither was perceived to have significantly more “premium” taste or textural profiles than three of the non-premium test samples.

One of our premium brands did achieve the top directional scores for quality and flavour. It was also most likely to be described as natural, least likely to be described as artificial, and it had the best scores for sweetness and texture of the bite. However, despite its premium credentials it was too thin and not creamy enough.

One of the most differentiating attributes of our samples was the rate of

melt. The melt rate can be described as the amount of time required for solid chocolate to turn into liquid while moving it around with the tongue. Generally we find that there is a consistent desire for fairly rapid melt. If the melt rate is too slow, the chocolate piece is typically described as waxy and artificial. A quick melt rate is associated with creaminess and milkiness, which are of course very desirable attributes of milk chocolate as well.

Our weakest performing brand scored dismally low on this attribute, with over half of respondents describing the melt as too slow. For the brand with the top score on this attribute, 68 per cent thought the melt was “just right,” while still 18 per cent desired a faster melt.

A labour of love

Purchase decisions in the chocolate bar section may be driven by a multitude of motivating factors, such as price points, brand credentials, emotional ties with the brand, or simply spontaneous cravings. In fact, when we asked our testers why they chose one brand of chocolate over another, 96 per cent simply attribute their brand choice to the generic catch-alls of “It’s a brand I like” or “It’s a brand I crave at the time.”

While not everyone has the same definition of the perfect chocolate “mate,” the real test is whether the experience delivers as anticipated. And like any relationship, it may make the difference between a match made in heaven...or the broken hearts club. ♡

For questions about this research, or how you can leverage consumer taste buds in your business, contact Dan Scholes at info@contracttesting.com or (905) 456-0783.