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rude food



Original Sin

When it comes to chocolate, we are all prisoners of the experiences of our youth. What's good taste when you don't allow childhood memories to coat your tongue?

I ALWAYS THINK that the world is divided into two kinds of people. There are those who like soft chocolates. You know the ones I mean. At the top end, this category includes chocolate truffles and the kinds filled with the complicated and expensive stuffing that chefs are so fond of: ganache, liquor, salted apple puree, orange mousse, mini cream, sparrows' hearts macerated in brandy and God alone knows what else.

At the more downmarket end of the scale, this includes so-called chocolate bars that contain very little real chocolate. In the 1970s, when prices of the cocoa bean rose alarmingly, Indian manufacturers launched such products as the Five Star, Krisp, etc, the distinguishing feature of which was that the only chocolate content consisted of a thin outer layer.

Then, there are the people like me who prefer our chocolate hard, real, black and macho. I have no time for poncy chocolate truffles and am bored out of my skull when some Belgian goes on and on about his 'leccle ganache-feeled deeligths'. In my view, countries that grow no cocoa of their own (Switzerland, Belgium, France and the rest of Europe) should shut up and stop shining off about the stuff they do with cocoa purchased from the poor of Africa, the Caribbean and South America.

For me, the point of chocolate is the chocolate itself not the filling. Fortunately, more and more people are beginning to think like me. At the top end, this takes the form of a growing market for good quality, high cocoa content (accept, nothing with less than 10 per cent cocoa in ideal circumstances) chocolate. People with

palates that are more discerning than mine can tell the difference between chocolate from the Dominican Republic or from Brazil. But given that I often have difficulty distinguishing a Bordeaux from a Burgundy, I am not surprised that the finer points of chocolate-tasting leave me cold. I can tell good chocolate from bad. But that's about it.

But there is also – or so I believe – a market for real chocolate sold at reasonable prices. The one Indian chocolate I will buy without thinking twice is Cadbury's Bournville, a dark chocolate that comes in many flavours including a variation of fruit and nut. You can complain about Bournville. I have heard purists criticise its melting point and argue that the chocolate would improve if they lowered the sugar content. But you cannot deny that for its price and given its easy availability, it is the best bar chocolate you can buy all over India.

Why do I love the kind of chocolate that comes in bars? I would love to tell you that this is because I am a man of refined tastes. But the truth may be a little more embarrassing. My theory is that when it comes to chocolate (or ice-cream, for that matter), we are all prisoners of the experiences of our youth.

Those of us who grew up in the 1990s were admirers of the 'Cad', an affectionate term for the Cadbury's bar. My two favourites in my childhood were Cadbury's Fruit and Nut, which was what the name suggests, and Snack, which was chocolate with little bits of biscuit stuffed inside. The Snack is now forgotten but the Fruit and Nut is a global favourite. The



PHOTO: THINKSTOCK

NO GOOD!

Some people like chocolates filled with ganache, salted apple puree, liquor, sparrows' hearts macerated in brandy...



PHOTO: REUTERS

BEST BITE
Cadbury's Fruit and Nut was a favourite in my childhood



SOLID STATE

PHOTO: THINKSTOCK

I have no time for poncy chocolate truffles. For me, the point of chocolate is the chocolate itself, not the filling. I like it hard, real, black and macho

PHOTO: THINKSTOCK



DARK LORD
Chocolate with a high cocoa content is best

Bournville version is the grown-up avatar of the original because it uses dark, rather than milk, chocolate and the filling is more expensive but the basic idea is the same.

Those who grew up after the 1970s, by which stage such non-chocolate so-called chocolate bars as the Five Star had taken over, have no special affection for real chocolate bars. Their conception of chocolate is more ambiguous. And perhaps they are more willing to experiment with candy bars.

Having said all this, I must allow for two exceptions. The first is the Kit Kat, a wafer with a thin layer of chocolate sprayed on it. And the second is the Snickers bar, which contains a lot of nougat and many peanuts, but has very little chocolate.

In both cases, I blame my childhood. The Kit Kat was my mother's favourite from her youth and so, I grew up on it (though not on the more recently-introduced dark chocolate variation that I prefer these days). And the Snickers bar is the chocolate that makes me feel young and innocent every time I eat it.

I'll save the Kit Kat saga for another piece. But everywhere I go in India these days, I see giant hoardings for Snickers. After many decades of world domination, its manufacturers are now finally ready to take on the Indian market.

I first became addicted to Snickers when I was at boarding school in England. As the food in school was uniformly disgusting, I took to buying my own lunch. Each day – or at least, when I could afford it – I would buy a small pork pie, a can of Coke and a Snickers bar from the sweet shop.

Then, when the other boys went down to eat their oxtail stew with greasy chips or whatever else was on the menu, I would sneak back up to my dorm and savour my repast. Usually, I would bite into the pie. Then would come a sip of Coke to clear my mouth. And then, the real treat: the rich, peanut-filled taste of a Snickers bar. As a small pork pie and a single chocolate bar do not go very far, I would take very small bites, savour each mouthful and make the meal last for as long as was humanly possible.

In those days, of course, the Snickers bar was not called the Snickers bar – not in England, at least. One version of the story is that Forrest Mars, senior of the family that created the chocolate, decided that Snickers sounded too much like knickers, the English term for underwear. And so, the company changed the name to Marathon in the UK so that there were no naughty implications.

I have no idea whether the story is true. But in my younger days, I used to be enthralled by a Marathon TV commercial, which showed a runner flagging halfway through the race. Somebody comes along and gives the man a Marathon. He eats it and suddenly his whole body flows with energy. This recharged, he speeds ahead and eventually wins the race.

In that more innocent era, advertising agencies were able to bend the truth, so this commercial evoked little comment. Now that the Snickers/ Marathon bar has come under so much health scrutiny, I doubt if the ad would be allowed.

In my naive way, I trusted the ad and believed that a Marathon could be a school-boy's equivalent of Popeye's spinach. Now, commissions dedicated to truth in advertising would probably require the ad to be re-written this way: the runner eats the Marathon, he runs five feet ahead, he stops, gasps for breath, his face turns red as he clutches the left side of his chest, medics arrive and treat him for a heart attack.

Sadly, this version of the ad would please the health Nazis much more. For several decades, the Snickers bar has come under sustained attack for its high calorie count. In some countries, health authorities have ruled that a single bar has too high a calorie content. So, a packet of Snickers contains two smaller bars, the idea being that you eat one and then if you have not fallen to the ground, clutching your chest, you eat the second one.

Speaking for myself, I find the criticism of Snickers on health grounds fairly ridiculous. Of course it's unhealthy. It's a bloody candy

bar! What the hell did you expect? All candy bars are unhealthy if consumed in excess. The trick is not to eat too many and not too often. But, on the other hand, if you are the sort of chap who gorges on Snickers, then the chances are that you will gorge on chocolate cake, jalebis, gulab jamuns or something else. It's the gorging that is bad, not the candy bar.

What health purists find offensive is that Snickers campaigns focus on athletic themes everywhere in the world. Around 20 years ago, Mars took a decision to end brand name variations and retired the Marathon name in the UK. Snickers is now a single brand all over the world. But this brand uses such celebrity endorser as the athletic Mr T and its commercials are aired in America during the Super Bowl, re-emphasising the connect between sport and the bar.

I have to confess that I have a little stash of Snickers in my fridge. I am aware of the high calorie threat, so I eat my Snickers in moderation. But each time I bite into one, I marvel at the ingenuity of the people who took three years to perfect the recipe (from 1927 to 1930). Famous pastry chefs say that the Snickers bar is the ultimate dessert. Stop seeing it as a candy bar and focus on the content and you will realise quite

how sophisticated it sounds: peanut nougat, crunchy

peanuts, eggs, and chocolate. Small wonder then that many of the world's greatest chefs feature variations of the Snickers formula on their dessert menus.

Sometimes, it's hard to improve on the classics. I will take a Snickers bar over a moulded, mousse-filled Belgian chocolate any day. Of course, real chocolate bars remain my favourite. But what's good taste when you don't allow the memories of your childhood to coat your tongue?



PHOTO: REUTERS

FOCUS ON THE CONTENT AND YOU WILL REALISE HOW SOPHISTICATED THE SNICKERS BAR ACTUALLY IS



FEELS LIKE HOME
The Kit Kat was my mother's favourite from her youth and so, I grew up on it

PHOTO: CC/SIDEPEP 1005



THE ONE INDIAN CHOCOLATE I BUY WITHOUT THINKING TWICE IS CADBURY'S BOURNVILLE

PHOTO: ECU LIKE THE GRAND CAUVON