

B.T. and the Chocolate Factory [1]

Jerimiah Oetting [2] | April 16th, 2008



Illustration by Ben Alpert

Building 14 of 2010 East Hennepin Ave SE looks abandoned. Like the other buildings on the large cement lot, its cracked foundation is made of dark brown bricks and features unlit, grimy windows. The collection of some 15 buildings was once owned by General Mills, but now play host to a variety of businesses, artists and artisans. The only evidence of life is the few hand made signs posted on the exterior walls: “Zelle Glass Studio,” “Deco Catering,” and “Yeowww! Brand Catnip,” just to name a few. While Building 14 is devoid of any business signs, within a few seconds of walking through its doors, the intense aromas provide only one conclusion: chocolate.

Brian McElrath, founder of B.T. McElrath Chocolatier, feels right at home in his underground chocolate factory. Since 1997, McElrath has been producing fine artisan chocolates locally in Minneapolis. Over the years, his distribution has expanded all over the country, and his workspace has increased from one room to four.

“These rooms used to be practice spaces for bands,” he says. “Back then, I was really doing everything myself.” Despite national distribution, his four-room complex is small compared to the factories where industrial, mass produced chocolate is created.

“My entire facility is about the size of a single laboratory in a bigger company,” he says. “Those places can be producing tons of chocolate with just a couple guys pushing buttons.”

With such a small location and established competition, it seems miraculous that independent chocolatiers exist, let alone become successful. McElrath has the calm demeanor and level headedness of a businessman, but the excitement in his voice indicates an utter devotion to his trade. After numerous awards and appearances on both the Travel Channel and the Food Network, B.T. McElrath has proven that it is a possibility to make it in the chocolate industry.

“In the mid 1960’s the price of cocoa skyrocketed. All of a sudden [chocolate manufacturers] began paying a dime for what used to cost them a nickel,” McElrath says. To compensate, quality went down and chocolate became a mass produced “commodity.”

“European chocolate managed to maintain a high level of standards, but American chocolate really decreased in quality after the 60’s,” he says.

Today, Hershey and Nestle products are available at every gas station and grocery store. While their prices are low and their supply endless, the abundance of mass-produced chocolate creates a niche market for small chocolatiers who are more concerned with customer satisfaction and quality.

“Our prices don’t reflect a commodity,” he says. “A specialty food is something someone seeks out without shopping. [Our customers] know our products are high quality.”

So where does this sought out “quality” come from? McElrath began his career in the culinary arts at the California Culinary Academy, where he had to take a confectionary elective as part of a requirement. “That’s where the chocolate bug bit me,” he says.

After graduating, McElrath spent nearly 20 years devoted to the culinary arts, working everywhere from a country club to a private yacht that made yearly visits to the Bahamas. During these years he gained proficiency.

“I did that for 20 years, but I needed a change,” he says. He realized that the

expertise he gained in balancing sauces could be carried over to fillings for chocolate. “The voices in my head started telling me I really wanted to work with chocolate, so that’s what I did,” he says.

By mixing and matching different ingredients, McElrath’s chocolates became unique in taste. “The buzzword then was ‘nouvelle cuisine,’ what we called melding different types of cuisine together,” he says. With this idea in mind, McElrath was able to broaden the spectrum of flavor for the chocolate he developed. For example, the Caramelized Raspberry Ganache is described on his web site as, “A dark chocolate caramelized red raspberry ganache, with a hint of hazelnut enrobed in 60% dark chocolate and topped with dried red raspberries.” Despite the combination of so many different ingredients, McElrath cannot downplay the importance of the actual chocolate. “The chocolate always has to prevail,” he says. “Chocolate really has an intense flavor, so it takes a lot of time to correctly balance the flavor.”

That balance has apparently been found. McElrath stated that he has a broad range in customers across the country. Recently, Steven Tyler of Aerosmith, when in the area, asked for B.T. McElrath chocolates by name. “He came into one of my retailers and dropped like 200 bucks on chocolate,” McElrath says.

However, B.T. McElrath isn’t the only chocolatier in Minneapolis. Across the hall in Building 14 is another entrepreneur of the same trade, Colin Gaskow, owner and operator of The Rogue Chocolatier. When asked about the tension or friendliness that must occur between neighboring competitors, McElrath says, “I’ve found that between craftsmen, there is always a level of respect and friendliness. There are things we don’t tell one another...but we’re friends. We share.”

There is also a difference between the two chocolatiers. Namely, Gaskow specializes in creating chocolate from raw cocoa beans, while McElrath focuses on taking chocolate and combining it with different ingredients to modify its flavor. Though the Rogue Chocolatier was out of the country looking for new sources of cocoa beans, McElrath was able to say a few words on his behalf.

“He is certainly ambitious. The level at which he’s working is sheer madness,” McElrath says. Apparently, synthesizing chocolate from raw cocoa beans requires a collection of machinery that is normally found only in large factories,

and a level of dedication that is stunning.

With only friendly competition on the local level, B.T. McElrath is looking forward to a bright future. While chocolates available in many retail stores across the country, McElrath states that he is “exploring the different options” of opening a local boutique dedicated to his company’s products. That is good news for the people of Minneapolis, because after a brief sample of a few different products, this Wakie is hooked. My personal favorite? The Salty Dog bar, a rich dark chocolate masterpiece covered in Portuguese sea salt and mixed with a hint of toffee. Pick it up at The Walker Art Center, and prepare to be amazed.

Oh, and one last thing. McElrath likes the Johnny Depp version over the Gene Wilder version. I guess we’ll have to agree to disagree.

1. <http://www.wakemag.org/minds-eye/bt-and-the-chocolate-factory/>
2. <http://www.wakemag.org/author/joetting/>
3. <http://www.wakemag.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/04/chocolate.jpg>