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Fall's candy crush: How suburban confectioners deal with the spike in demand

By John T. Slania, Daily Herald Business Ledger Writer

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Craig Leva loves fall. He loves the rich colors of turning leaves, the warmth of a well-worn sweatshirt and the thrill of a college-football game.

But Leva's autumnal affection isn't just personal. He also means business.

As CEO of Long Grove Confectionery Co., Leva loves fall because it's the busiest time of year for his firm. Long Grove Confectionery does 75 percent of its business from October through December.

"Fall is really the turning point of the year for most candy companies," Leva said. "People are indoors, gathering with family and friends, and it's kind of an eating festival. It's a really busy time for us."

Confectioners across Chicago and the suburbs share similar feelings. Autumn signals the arrival of the first of the big four holidays: Halloween. That candy-crazy holiday is quickly followed by Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Eve, marking the season when consumption of sweet treats is at its peak.

Thus, Long Grove Confectionery's catalog and retail outlets in Long Grove and Buffalo Grove begin the season featuring Halloween items such as chocolate-covered marshmallow pops decorated like witches and goblins, and chocolates shaped like spooky skulls.

Those items are the curtain raisers on Long Grove's line of chocolate treats for Thanksgiving and Christmas.

"It starts with Halloween and doesn't slow down until New Year's Day. Then people start going to Lifetime Fitness," Leva joked.

The Chicago area has long been known as one the great candy capitals of the world. While mergers and acquisitions have reduced the number of companies, there is still a solid core of confectioners that welcome the arrival of autumn:

- Ferrara Candy Co. in Oakbrook Terrace, which makes Lemonheads, Atomic Fireballs, Original Boston Baked Beans and other popular Halloween candies.
- Morke's Chocolates in Palatine, which features a variety of Halloween-related treats, from chocolate Frankenstein suckers to chocolate skulls.
- The Popcorn Factory, headquartered in Lake Forest, sells Halloween-themed gourmet popcorn and popcorn balls.
- Affy Tapple in Niles, maker of caramel apples, chocolate and candy-coated apples and caramel corn.
- World's Finest Chocolate in Orland Hills, which produces chocolate bars and chocolate-covered nuts.
- Nestle-owned Curtiss Candy in Franklin Park, the maker of Butterfinger and Baby Ruth.

Then there are storied candy companies with roots in Chicago, including M&M/Mars, Wrigley, Tootsie Roll, Fanny Mae and Blommer Chocolate.

Halloween is particularly popular with these confectioners, as it is the top-selling holiday for candy. This year, some \$2.5 billion in candy is expected to be sold for Halloween, slightly higher than the \$2.4 billion sold last year, according to the National Confectioners Association.



Owner Craig Leva of Long Grove Confectionery in Buffalo Grove with Halloween candy. (Gilbert R. Boucher II/gboucher@dailyherald.com)



Trick or Treat Takeaways

- Consumers are expected to spend \$2.5 billion on Halloween candy this year, compared with \$2.4 billion in 2013.
- 75 percent of households plan to hand out candy to trick-or-treaters.
- Midwesterners are more likely to give out candy (75 percent) than the rest of the nation (71 percent).
- Suburban confectioners such as Long Grove Confectionery, Morke's Chocolates, Ferrara Candy, The Popcorn Factory, Curtiss Candy and Affy Tapple, make the bulk of their annual sales from October-December.
- Iconic confectioners with roots in Chicago include M&M/Mars, Wrigley, Tootsie Roll and Blommer Chocolate.

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"Halloween has become an increasingly popular holiday," said Susan Whiteside, vice president of communication for the association.

Whiteside surmises that the growing popularity of Halloween is a generational phenomenon. The practice of trick or treating took shape early in the 20th century, she said. Now, four generations — the Greatest Generation, Baby Boomers, Gen X and Millennials — celebrate the holiday, she said.

"You have people of the 60-plus generation who have passed the tradition along to their children and grandchildren. They know of no other way to celebrate than handing out candy," Whiteside said.

To satisfy all those people with a sweet tooth, confectioners spend months gearing up for their busiest season.

"We start planning for Halloween in March," said Alan Petrik, chief operating officer for The Popcorn Factory.

With The Popcorn Factory's line of popcorn and popcorn balls sold through catalogs and online, the company must prepare early, with the first major marketing taking place in late August, Petrik said. The catalog features Halloween popcorn tins, kettle corn and popcorn ball gift packs, chocolates, cookies and caramel apples.

With the arrival of fall, the company's factory workforce rises from 60 to 300 to handle the flood of orders that remains steady through December.

The volume of orders is particularly challenging, Petrik said, because The Popcorn Factory pops its corn fresh daily, creates custom orders, and guarantees next-day delivery if orders arrive before 2:30 p.m. EST.

"There is a substantial ramp-up because everything we do is custom, and we want to deliver it quickly," he said.

A flurry of retail and consumer deliveries also are being made at neighboring Affy Tapple in Niles, the iconic caramel apple maker that has roots in Chicago dating to 1948.

Each day, thousands of fresh apples arrive at the factory, where workers manually insert the wood handles. The apples then move down a conveyor, where they are dipped in caramel and packaged for delivery. The Affy Tapples are shipped within 24 hours to ensure freshness.

A core annual workforce of 20 skyrockets to as high as 150 during fall, as demand for caramel apples climbs.

"During the busy times, we're running two shifts and working on weekends," said Stuart Sorkin, president and CEO.

Affy Tapple also has a line of gourmet apples under the Mrs. Prindable's line. These apples, dipped in rich chocolate, caramel and nuts, are each hand made.

"I think our products are year-round items, but caramel apples traditionally have been a fall item. They coincide with the fall harvest," Sorkin said.

Sorkin fell in love with Affy Tapple as a child growing up in Chicago's Rogers Park neighborhood. He'd frequent Affy Tapple's original location on Clark Street. After a successful career in finance, he bought the company in 1995. Sorkin is pleased to carry on the confectionery tradition that made Chicago famous.

"Chicago has always had a lot of unique, niche confectionery players," Sorkin said. "Some of the big guys are no longer here. But there are still unique confectioners like us to carry the torch."

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