

HighLife

Vail Daily | Monday, August 19, 2013 | Section B

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the PLEASURE of making pleasure

The chocolate industry has a rich heritage woven into the fabric of Swiss culture

By Suzanne Hoffman
Behind the Scenes

Recently, I introduced you to a shrine to carbohydrate splendor, Boulangerie-Pâtisserie-Confiserie Taillens in Crans-Montana, Switzerland. It's now time to talk chocolate and meet Nicolas Taillens, the creative genius now at the helm of the award-winning family business.

INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS

Swiss youngsters often venture abroad, learning new skills and honing those acquired in their homeland, particularly in oenology and culinary arts. These new skills and exposure to different cultures are key ingredients for success in a family business where ideas can become stale. Nicolas Taillens was one of those adventurous young Swiss whose passion for his artistic craft took him to distant shores — and kitchens.



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The heart and soul of Boulangerie Taillens: Reto, Marie Claire, Guido, Sylvie and Nicolas Taillens, and Pasquale Palumbo.

Although Nicolas holds an economics degree from Lausanne University, he followed his grandparents and parents into the world of pastry and bread. The world-famous Confiserie Spruengli in Zurich provided a stellar opportunity for an apprenticeship in pastry and confections. Next, Nicolas ventured to Schoenried, near Gstaad, for another apprenticeship — this time as a baker at Backerei Wehren. Pastry, confections and bread. Apprenticeships in the three pillars of Taillens' product line were crucial parts of Nicolas' training outside the family business.

Jobs in London and Singapore and one aboard Cunard's ship, VistaJord, rounded Nicolas' experience away from Valais. After four years of apprenticeships and five years abroad, Nicolas headed home in 1998 to take his place in the family business.

FAMILY OF PASSIONATE ARTISANS

Despite success and the passage of time, Taillens remains a strong family owned and operated



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Fruit Defendus (Forbidden Fruit) chocolates from Taillens are made with the region's famous liqueurs, Williamine and Abricotine.

business. Nicolas (CEO and head of production) and his sister Sylvie (sales director) comprise Taillens' third generation. Their father Reto (board vice president) and uncle Guido (board president) expanded Berthe and Oscar Taillens' boulangerie into a pâtisserie, confiserie and tea room, setting the stage for Nicolas and Sylvie to continue to grow the business.

Although officially retired, Nicolas' mom, Marie Claire, still works during Christmas and high season. His father Reto continues to be a smiling, gregarious fixture in the Montana shop. Even Sylvie's husband, Pasquale Palumbo, is a member of Taillens' management team, responsible for crucial components of the successful business model — service and the two tea rooms where patrons can savor Taillens' sweet creations in a congenial atmosphere.

So there's the family. Let's now look at Nicolas' own stamp on the family business — chocolate.

HOW CHOCOLATE BECAME SWISS

Nicolas is part of an industry with a rich heritage woven into the fabric of Swiss culture.

Before we explore Nicolas' world of chocolate, let's look at some snippets of Swiss chocolate history to put it all in context.

In 1697, upon returning from a trip to Brussels, Zurich Mayor Heinrich Escher, introduced chocolate to

Switzerland. Although nothing close to today's heavenly formulations, this rudimentary chocolate was considered an indulgence and believed to be an aphrodisiac.

Twenty-five years later, chocolate went underground after the Zurich city council banned the decadently delicious, pleasurable food of the gods. It's amazing considering Zurich is now the chocolate world's epicenter, where one can find every type of handmade or mass produced chocolate.

Centuries passed with Phillippe Suchard (1797-1884), Henri Nestle (1814-1890), Daniel Peter (1836-1919) and Rudolphe Lindt (1855-1909) and their chocolate pioneering peers developing processes to improve the taste and production of chocolate. Although chocolate's roots are planted in places like Belgium and Italy, it was the genius of these Swiss men that enabled the dark, bitter and gritty concoction's transformation into the velvety delight that today is an integral part of Switzerland's identity.

Today, Swiss chocolate artisans toil at their labor of love in famous brands' factories and in over 300 confectionery and pastry shops across the Alpine country. One of those shops where Swiss chocolate-making traditions are revered is Boulangerie-Pâtisserie-Confiserie Taillens.

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