

Longtime business owners committed to keeping neighbors happy with chocolates from around the world and quirky packaging

Description

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Enter Jack Epsteinâ??s cool, narrow shop and you walk a chocolate gauntlet down a central aisle: bars from around the world line the walls on either side. Individual confections, truffles, and foil-wrapped hearts perch on the lower shelves.

No wonder the longtime Noe Valley business is called Chocolate Covered. He sources the sweet-smelling wares from across the globe, offering more than 900 types of chocolates from upwards of 20 countries. A veritable United Nations of Chocolate.

â??I get visitors from local chocolatiers who spend hundreds of dollars in the name of research,â?• Epstein said. â??I am like a chocolate library.â?• They also come to talk about their newest creations, which he sometimes includes in his selections.



Owner Jack Epstein pulls out one of his more than 5,000 unique tins for boxing chocolates that customers can choose from. He sells more than 900 types of chocolates from upwards of 20 countries. Epstein designs the covers, most of them from his photos of San Francisco street signs, above and, local businesses, below. (All photos by Colin Campbell)



At 70 and 78, Jack and his partner, Marilyn Sitkoff, have been in business in Noe Valley for over 40 years, surviving in an increasingly tough retail environment. They have ridden the waves of the boom times, bust times, and the Covid pandemic.

Epstein, who has been in business in the neighborhood since 1983, doesnâ??t sell online and takes only cash and credit cards. He says itâ??s too much extra work to deal with e-commerce. Heâ??s at the shop from 10 to 6, putting in 60 to 70 hours seven days a week, with the help of one part-time employee. â??I am like the janitor with MUNI who works over 500 hours overtime,â?• he said with a laugh. â??However, I donâ??t make $250,000 a year!â?•

Epstein looks for high quality when he buys chocolates. â??I love unique bars that are outside of the box but well done.â?•

Brown cheese chocolate?

One of his favorites is from Lithuania thatâ??s flavored with durian, a popular though pungent fruit prized in Southeast Asia that has a custardy sweetness. Or the one from Norway, made with brown cheese, or Brunost, which has a caramelized taste, or the salty-sweet â??Salted Duck Eggâ?• from Singapore.â?• Yup, those are chocolate bars.

Higher on the shelves sit over 5,000 of the tin gift boxes heâ??s created, which customers can fill with whatever chocolates they like. The boxes are adorned with images of the signs of parks, schools, bars, bookstores, taquerias, coffee shops, and San Francisco streets, photographed by Epstein over the years.

â??I had a guy come in from New Jersey who used to live here and was so excited to see â??Army Street,â?• long since renamed Cesar Chavez Street.

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Family portraits adorn some of the tins: thereâ??s his grandfather and Epstein himself at his Bar Mitzvah. A few boast the images of pop culture figures, downloaded from the Internet.

Epstein prints the photographs on paper, which he glues to the boxes and then coats with a protective finish.

â??The boxes began as a creative outlet, part of putting together the whole package, something unique to San Francisco, instead of generic boxes from gift shows,â?• he said.

In the late â??90s, the stodgy world of chocolates was on the cusp of a major change, Epstein said. In much the same way Samuel Adams kicked off the move to artisanal breweries, high-end chocolates featuring exotic flavors were entering and reshaping the market.

San Francisco was at the epicenter of the trend, with local businesspeople creating signature brands like Scharffenberger, Black Mountain, Joseph Schmidt, Taza, and Tcho, he said.

Chocolates wasnâ??t his first retail enterprise. It was clothing, the family business. Epstein grew up in New York in a middle-class Jewish family. His father worked in the garment industry; his grandfather was a tailor.

The arts and crafts circuit

Following his brother to Los Angeles in 1979, Epstein kept up the tradition. He and Sitkoff sold homemade clothes, under the name Ocean Front Walkers, on the Venice Beach boardwalk.



Epstein next to boxes adorned with images of his family members and even himself.

They traveled the arts and crafts festival circuit around the country, then moved to San Francisco in 1983. They found an apartment with retail space just off 24th Street, Noe Valleyâ??s main drag. They lived in the back and sold novelty socks and pajamas in the front shop, keeping their businessâ?? original name.

They ran it for almost 38 years until closing during the pandemic.

Retail clothing wasnâ??t keeping up with the cost of living, so Epstein ventured into the artisanal chocolate business in 1994. He got the idea when shopping for special chocolates for Sitkoff. Having to leave the neighborhood to find them, he thought, â??Thereâ??s a niche for a chocolate store here. â??

He leased a small basement space on 24th Street and within three years moved it above ground to another location down the block, adding his decorated tins. As the specialty chocolate business took off, he expanded and moved into his current location in 2006.

Itâ??s still not a large space.â??My store is only eight feet wide, if you sneeze, you miss it,â?• said Epstein, whose open, expressive face smiles easily and often. A mane of white, curly hair tumbles from under a baseball cap, and wisecracks punctuate his New York accent, borscht-belt style conversation.

He carefully but nimbly climbs a tall sliding ladder to grab a gift box and a passion fruit chocolate bar from Manhattan off the top shelf.

â??When I was younger and first came to California, I used to do Tai Chi on Venice Beach. I never should have stopped; I have some back issues,â?• he said. â??I stand all day. I donâ??t usually sit till the last half hour.â?•

Good energy

One recent August morning, a customer walked in and took an appreciative breath, â??It smells so good in here.â?•

She chose a box named MYRA to fill. Proffering a few stray truffles from a half-price basket, Epstein said, â??Hi dear, you want something nice in there? A lavender caramel? A peanut butter butterfly?â?•

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MYRA

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For a small business owner of a certain age, the pandemic was challenging. The previous year had been his best, with sales growing exponentially.

He didnâ??t let anyone in the store. Instead, he stood at the front door and let customers point to items, and he fetched them. â??I was not going to be forced out of San Francisco, I was going to work as many hours as it takes, to stay here.â?•

His landlord rolled the rent back a few years, which helped, he said. â??It wasnâ??t fun, but it wasnâ??t tragic, because of the low overhead. I have a fair landlord, so I have no complaints about that.â?•

And, he remembers the early days. â??You know chocolate didnâ??t start out like this. There were days in the beginning when I only took in 30 dollars.â?•

Epstein and Sitkoff, who live within one block of their shop, stuck with Noe Valley and Noe Valley stuck with them. â??There were nice people when I came here,â?• said Epstein, â??and there are nice people now, with a little more money.â?•

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Business has rebounded and is doing well again. Yet itâ??s more than just sales for Epstein.

â??I have a role in the community, to put out good energy into the neighborhood. People come in happy, and they leave happier.â?•

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