

Quebec chocolatiers bring Laura Secord, maker of the iconic egg, back home

By David Hayes, Toronto Star, April 7, 2012

The Laura Secord egg is an exquisite chocolate dome covering a dairy-white layer of butter cream. Inside that nestles a creamy yellow yolk made of butter, sugar and food colouring that is mysteriously, miraculously moist. That it looks more like a Quonset hut than an egg is of no consequence to the taste, which is rich and chocolatey, stirring archetypal memories of childhood. But at the front end of the production line at Laura Secord's Quebec City plant, the famous egg is a wan lump of crystallized sugar resembling a perogy.

Not for long, though. Once it moves along a conveyor belt into the "enrobing chamber," the embryo is drenched in a thick curtain of liquid chocolate and gradually begins to take on its characteristic shape. A pair of fans blow away excess chocolate so there are no unsightly lumps. From there it moves to the cooling tunnel, which is kept at a constant temperature of 12C. In the final stage, a team of white-coated ladies wearing hair nets pack the egg boxes with straw, wrapping the eggs in wax paper before they're placed in their nests. The whole process takes about 15 minutes.

Easter is the chief Christian feast and for generations of Canadians the food of choice is the Secord egg. In a production run that begins in the fall, about 1.3 million eggs are hatched, packaged in their distinctive yellow boxes and distributed across the nation. That means about one out of every 26 Canadians will eat one (unless, of course, a great many of us eat more than one). Every Easter it's the largest-selling Canadian chocolate but most don't know about the company's history.

This year, with so much attention focused on activities commemorating the War of 1812, it's worth noting that a heroine of that conflict — or, at least, the company named after her — has recently come home.

In June of 1813, Laura Secord, a United Empire Loyalist, overheard plans of an intended American attack and walked 32 kilometres to warn British officers. Although some of the details are debated, the results of her effort are considered a turning point in the war and Laura Secord became a Canadian icon. A century later, Toronto businessman Frank O'Connor named his new chocolate company in her honour and, in the 1920s, introduced what became the legendary buttercream-filled egg.

In 1969, John Labatt Limited bought Laura Secord and 14 years later sold it to the English company Rowntree MacIntosh Corp. (So at least the company was still part of the Commonwealth.) But in 1988, the Swiss multinational Nestlé S.A. bought Rowntree and, in the cruelest irony of all, two years later sold Laura Secord to the Archibald Candy Corporation of Chicago, which later sold it to a consortium of U.S.-based private equity investment firms. Laura Secord had fallen into the hands of the Americans!

In 2010, though, chocolatiers Jean and Jacques Leclerc, who own Quebec City-based Nutriart Inc., brought Laura Secord back to Canada. Given the popularity of the Secord egg, it's no surprise the new owners pay particularly close attention to its production.

Overseeing the production line is 29-year-old Maxime Grimard, who, as Laura Secord's research and development specialist, is the company's resident "eggs-pert." "Part of my job is developing new formulas," says Grimard. "But in this case we use the same recipe we've been using since the 1920s so I just have to make sure every step happens correctly, that each year the egg is the same."

Quality control is important. All the eggs are inspected and weighed to make sure they conform to their intended sizes: a bite-sized 20 grams, 75 grams, 150 grams and the huge 300-gram model. They even pass through a metal detector in case a tiny foreign object found its way into the egg. Throughout the process, inferior specimens end up banished forlornly to a reject box.

Can anyone eat the 300-gram egg in one sitting? "Well," says Grimard, "my boss, who is older than me, says that when she was young you put the egg in the freezer. During Easter time, you took it out, cut a slice off it, then put it back in the freezer."

Is that what you do?

"No, I don't do that," says Grimard. "To tell you the truth, I eat it all."