

Wrentham Magazine

How Sweet It Is
Trappistine Quality Candy
by Leah J. Matuson

Delectable milk chocolate almond bark, butter nut munch and mouth-watering maple walnut penuche are just a few of the stellar offerings from the Cistercian sisters at Mount Saint Mary's Abbey in Wrentham. For over 55 years, they've been pouring high quality ingredients, and love, into their Trappistine Quality Candy.

Though not too far from the main road, Mount Saint Mary's Abbey is nearly hidden from view on 600 bucolic acres. The Abbey, established in Wrentham in 1949 by sisters from St. Mary's Abbey in Ireland, was the first monastery of Cistercian nuns in the United States.

The Cistercian Doctrine

The Cistercian or Trappistine doctrine believes in a balance of work, prayer and lectio divina (sacred reading, primarily of Holy Scripture). As part of their daily devotion, each Abbey in the Cistercian order places great emphasis on manual labor. Their labor is offered to God for blessing, and is often simple and ordinary. And Trappistine Quality Candy is their candy-making industry that allows them to be a self-supporting community.

But in the beginning, the Abbey was a dairy farm. The sisters baked bread to support themselves. As time went by it was evident that baking bread wasn't an industry that could support their community. They needed something better.

Something Sweet

Whether it was divine providence or being in the right place at the right time we might never know but, over five decades ago, John Cran, master candy maker, and friend of the Monks of Spencer (they make Trappist preserves) provided the perfect solution.

Cran not only taught the sisters the secrets of superior candy making, but provided them with supplies and recipes so that they could successfully embark on a new business to support their community.

Within a year, the sisters' new venture was up and running. Using only high quality ingredients and no preservatives, they whole-heartedly delved into the candy business with their melt-in-your-mouth, handmade vanilla nut caramel.

Word quickly spread, and the sisters couldn't keep up with their orders -- especially during the holidays. Eventually they needed to invest in equipment that would not only help them meet demand but would help their business expand as well.

Sister Janice is involved in the office management side of the candy business. "We make our living by the work of our hands; this is part of our monastic rule of life, so candy making will never be fully automated."

As more and more people learned of the sisters' tasty confections, the candy business grew. But their candy building, constructed in the early 1960's, wasn't nearly large enough to satisfy their ever-increasing requirements. They needed more space. And that wasn't all.

Running Out of Room

"The old building was pretty basic, and the layout was inefficient," says Sister Janice. "There was little space for shipping and receiving. As time went by, we were running out of room."

Not only was space an issue, but the building's location was also becoming a problem.

"The building was a distance from the monastery," continues Sister Janice. "It wasn't accessible to all the sisters. In bad weather, it was dangerous walking there."

And, since the building wasn't temperature or humidity controlled, the sisters were at the mercy of the weather.

It was clear that something had to be done. So the sisters invited architects and engineers come in and look at what existed, and what they needed. Would they add more space to the original building, or construct a new facility? That was about seven years ago.

"We had to ask ourselves, 'Is making candy still a viable way to support our community?'" comments Sister Janice.

The answer was a resounding "yes," and extensive planning for the new candy house began. The same architect who had renovated the Abbey's church several years ago was chosen to design the new candy production facility.

A Spacious New Building

It's been a little over a year since breaking ground. Today, the sisters are producing candy more efficiently than ever before in their spacious, light-filled, temperature and humidity-controlled building, which is directly connected to the monastery for easy accessibility for everyone.

The enormous structure houses kitchen and production areas, shipping and receiving, sanctuary and conference rooms, common areas, the business office and space for their new gift shop.

The kitchen is huge and holds assorted candy-making equipment and massive refrigerators line a very long wall. The production floor, sparkling and spotless, seems to go on forever as do the windows running the length of the production room. And when the sisters look up, they can see an extraordinarily high ceiling with colorful duct work. "We try to keep candy making a prayerful experience as best we can, in a quiet atmosphere," says Sister Janice.

Made with Love

Whether milk chocolate almond bark or chocolate walnut fudge, Butter Nut Munch or maple walnut penuche, there are a number of steps involved in candy-making. From preparation to cooking, coating and decorating, to wrapping, boxing and shipping the candy, each sister has a

specific job in the candy-making process. “And, no matter where we find ourselves in the monastery,” says Sister Janice, “we try to bring love into our world.”

Here Comes Santa Claus...and the Easter Bunny

Even with all the sisters working in some aspect of the process, they are still extremely busy getting ready for the Christmas season. Trappistine Quality Candy does 80 – 85 percent of its business during the holidays, with Easter running a close second. The sisters work long and hard to ensure there’s more than enough inventory to fill every order.

Says Sister Janice, “We had previously started production for the Christmas season in September. Now, with our brand, new facility, we’re thankful that we’re able to start holiday production earlier.”

While Trappistine Quality Candy may have grown, the quality and flavor of their confections are ever present. The sweets are available at the Abbey’s gift shop, online or via phone so that customers from all over can enjoy these wonderful treats.

A Tasty Secret

One of the secrets of tasty and eye-appealing professional chocolate products is “tempering.” Chocolate that has been tempered is smooth with a shiny finish and a crisp snap. And all Trappistine Quality Chocolate is expertly tempered. You’ll taste and hear the difference from your first bite. Just try snapping a mass-produced candy bar that you’d find in the checkout line at your local supermarket!

A Very Large Closet

Now that candy production is humming along in their beautiful, new building, the sisters are still thinking about what they might do with the old candy building. Sister Janice seems thoughtful, and smiles. “Right now, it’s a very large walk-in closet.”

Always Work to be Done

While candy production speeds ahead for the holidays, during the off-season, production slows down a bit -- but there’s still much work to be done at the Abbey. Everyday chores, maintaining the grounds, working outdoors, mowing the lawn, picking berries, tending the sheep, special projects...the list goes on.

“The land is part of the heart of the monastery,” says Sister Janice. “It’s where we can be in the presence of God’s beautiful creation.”

Flock of Sheep

The Abbey wouldn’t be the Abbey without its flock of 17 sheep and Pepito. Pepito is the resident llama who keeps a watchful eye on the flock. Not just pretty faces, the sheep also help maintain the fields. Come November, the sheep are sheared. The wool is sent to a cooperative where it’s cleansed, spun and made into blankets, which are for sale at the Abbey’s gift shop.

Going Green

A short stroll down the road, not too far from the monastery, is the Abbey’s wind turbine. That’s right, wind turbine. During the planning period for the candy building, “Sister Hazel had us

consider the possibility of a wind turbine,” says Sister Janice. “Stewardship is part of our life, and we care for our environment as best as we’re able.”

So, as part of construction, the sisters decided to go ahead with a wind turbine, as well as a geothermal heating and cooling system. Today, the wind turbine generates 70 percent of the monastery’s electricity needs.

A Life of Prayer and Spirituality

Living in a closed community allows the sisters to focus on their lives of prayer and contemplation.

“Silence and solitude are part of our lives,” says Sister Janice. “Our candy making supports that life. Candy making is a means to an end, not an end. We do what we can to preserve the ambience monastically... We might not be out in public physically, but we hope our hearts are embracing everyone.”

When we make our candy, we keep those who will buy the candy in our prayers, and we are immensely grateful for all who support us.”