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## JCC and the chocolate factory S.F. candy maker sets up confection kitchen

It's easy to spot the exercycle jocks and Hebrew 101 students at the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco. But look a little harder and you just might bump into the JCCSF's resident candy man.

That would be Chuck Siegel, founder of Charles Chocolates. Since launching the company seven months ago, Siegel has been holed up in one of the JCC's kosher kitchens handcrafting treats by the yumful and shipping them across the Bay Area.

With three fully outfitted kitchens — one milchik (dairy), one fleishik (meat), one non-kosher — the JCCSF had room to spare for an enterprising chocolatier like Siegel.

"We belong to the JCC and have a lot of friends there," says the longtime San Francisco resident. "They suggested I put in a proposal to rent the dairy kitchen, which was underutilized. The JCC has been absolutely wonderful. The staff loves coming down for the candy rejects."

Sadly for those employees, there aren't too many. Siegel, 42, is an experienced candy maker, having founded and later sold Attivo Confections. Like other Jewish chocolate makers — including Joseph Schmidt and Alice Medrich — Siegel has found the Bay Area the perfect home for a gourmet chocolate company.

Siegel's confections have found favor among local sweet teeth, with Charles Chocolates now available everywhere from San Jose to Santa Rosa. The lines include bars (three varieties: caramelized "Rice Krispie," hazelnut with candied orange peel and mocha java), triple-chocolate covered almonds and chocolate covered matzah. At 71 percent bittersweet chocolate, Siegel's candies pack a punch.

"I love developing new products," he says. "There is an exceptionally strong visceral pleasure I get from feeding people. Few ways of making a living are as satisfying."

Chocolate making has been his main gig since he was 25. A native of Flint, Mich., Siegel grew up in a Conservative household and enjoyed a rich Jewish upbringing. He went to Jewish summer camps in Maine and held his bar mitzvah ceremony at the Western Wall. But he says he didn't appreciate his Jewish heritage until adulthood.

"It's very important to me now," he notes. "I've been very involved in the Jewish community. We belong to Congregation Emanuel, my wife Shabana works for the Bureau of Jewish Education and our daughters are at Brandeis Hillel [Day School]."

Attivo Confections got off the ground around the same time other Bay Area-based food companies did, including Semifreddi's breads and Noah's Bagels. In short order, his cookies, truffles and gourmet s'mores could be found in stores across the country and as far away as Hong Kong.

After selling Attivo, Siegel spent several years consulting for the food industry, but he never lost his love of the business nor his flair for concocting tasty new chocolate recipes. In time, he had enough of both to get back in the game.

"In terms of vendors and supplies it was old home week," he says of the startup experience. "But on the selling side, everyone I used to sell to is gone. I had to start from ground zero. Still, chocolate is not the hardest thing in the world to sell if you make a quality product."

Though he has not yet obtained kosher certification, Siegel says that's high on his to-do list. "It's an important part of what Charles Chocolates will be about," he notes. He adds that his chocolate covered matzah won't make the "kosher for Passover" grade because it contains soy, though Sephardic Jews are in luck: In their tradition soybeans are kosher for Passover.

In time, Siegel expects his business will outgrow the cozy JCCSF kitchen. His products are already available at the JCC and over 25 gourmet sweet shops in the Bay Area. He says he will eventually need a space of his own. Until then, he's content to put in 14-hour days churning out the goodies. "It's not an issue of keeping the passion going," he says. "It's there and has always been there. I have a passion for chocolate and candy making, and I love to see people eat it."