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Chuck and the Chocolate Factory

By Tamara Palmer

Last year was a dark one for chocolate lovers. In July 2005 the Hershey Co. acquired Berkeley's Scharffen Berger; in August, it gobbled up San Francisco's Joseph Schmidt. Sweet-toothed locals were certain this development would be the death knell for the Bay Area's reputation among international chocolatiers. Surely Hershey would turn these venerable specialty brands into candle wax disguised as confections, at the same time making it impossible for independent candy-makers here to thrive.

Sucka Free City cares about the survival of indies in the wake of corporate takeovers. For this reason only — and not because we enjoy ravishing triple-chocolate-coated almonds and lavender honey truffles — we asked Chuck Siegel, proprietor of S.F.'s Charles Chocolates, what the climate for cacao is now.

Turns out, it's sweet. Siegel says that the Bay Area is experiencing something of a choco boom, with a handful of new companies (including Coco-luxe Confections and Cocoa Carcione) having sprouted up in the last six months. "It's actually an area of the industry where most of the people doing well are small and independent," he explains.

He would know: Siegel's inventive morsels — made the old-fashioned way, by hand and in small batches — fetch more than \$50 a pound. He recently opened his first "test retail store" in the former space of Home Chef in the Laurel Village shopping center, where he'll stay until May 31, at which point he'll decide whether to open a full-fledged shop in the city. Signs indicate that he will, since he's had his hands full keeping enough product in stock.

As for the Hershey's buyout, Siegel says that it's a positive thing for high-end local chocolate masters like him and Michael Recchiuti (who operates a retail post in the Ferry Building).

"As a businessman, it validates what I do. It's saying, if Hershey wants to buy Scharffen Berger, it means that the 600-pound gorilla recognizes that super-premium chocolate is really where it's happening. All the double-digit growth in the chocolate industry is in the super-premium category, and commodity chocolate [like Hershey's] is stagnant or shrinking. So, for Hershey, they're looking at where the market is going, and they're not there. They did what any large corporation does: They bought their way into the market."

Siegel doesn't have much in common with the Hershey Co. Whereas the giant conglomerate sells a wide range of products, from energy bars to bottled milkshakes, the indie producer doesn't plan to expand drastically beyond his basic (but not simple) offerings — bars, nuts, *pate de fruit* (sugar-coated fruit bombs), and, of course, boxed bonbons.

"If I can't be the best at it, I don't want to do it," he says.

But he does have some things in common with one great candy-maker — Willy Wonka, from Roald Dahl's classic children's book, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. For example, their fathers both dealt with rotten teeth: Siegel's dad is a retired oral surgeon, while the young Wonka's was a dentist (in the recent Johnny Depp film adaptation).

They also both like to play with food. In the book, Willy Wonka made "eatable" marshmallow pillows and raised cows that produce chocolate milk. In Siegel's sugar-soaked playground of a store, you can eat the boxes that house his marzipan and *fleur de sel* caramels — dark chocolate containers with ornate white chocolate lids.

So let's review life in the sweet lane: Corporate invasion is good for business, and your biggest problem involves not being able to meet the fiendish demand for your treats. C'mon, Chuck — surely there's some hidden downside to making chocolates in the Bay Area?

"I know a lot of people in this business here," he counters. "By and large, we're all happy people."