

food

EDITED BY JULIET FLETCHER
juliet@citypaper.net

Krak Addicts

Zitner's Easter eggs are made just the way Philadelphians — and only us — like them.

By Carolyn Wyman

Philadelphia is in the midst of a Krak epidemic.

That's Krak with a "K," as in Zitner's Butter Krak dark chocolate Easter eggs, a local favorite now back on store shelves for their annual two-month stay.

We have Krak dealer Christine Murphy to thank for them being back on the streets. Murphy and her husband bought the North Philly candy company and its aging brick factory building near 17th and Allegheny from the Zitner family in 1990. Murphy says her Zitner CEO position is a much sweeter situation than her mid-'80s stint as Philadelphia's revenue commissioner.

"This company almost has a cult following. As soon as I say the name, people start telling me about their favorite flavor," says Murphy. She is tall and thin enough to make you wonder if she can smell the coconut and chocolate that hangs in her factory's air.

Like most Philadelphia-area candy companies, S. Zitner Co. makes chocolate Easter eggs filled with coconut, buttercream, marshmallow and peanut butter. But the flavor people favor is Butter Krak, consisting of a buttercream and coconut center covered in toasted coconut and dark chocolate. The treat was invented by company co-founder Annie Zitner in the 1930s and is unique to Zitner, probably because it is uniquely difficult to make.

Five years ago, in a labor-cost-cutting move, Murphy found a machine to place the soft centers on trays, but it made the centers a little drier. After receiving 125 letters of complaint, Murphy caved. Now, as in the old days, the centers are placed on wooden trays by hand. And the sticklers don't stop there: Even now, 11 years after the company went to coating the Kraks by machine, Murphy is still occasionally asked why the toasted coconut no longer pokes through the chocolate coating. (The answer is that the machines give Kraks a thicker chocolate coating, although no one has written to thank her for it.)

Zitner also makes chocolate-covered pretzels and caramel-covered apples. But 65 percent of their business is filled Easter eggs. Virtually all of the 7 million cream

egg sales are made within a two-hour drive of Center City. Murphy has had difficulty expanding the market area.

"The look is not all that appealing," she admits, eying a factory floor 1.8-ouncer. Indeed, with its flat chocolate base, the egg is only partly oval and looks more like a clump of dirt — or worse. Then there is the Krak name. It's the reason Murphy's 2002 attempt to, ahem, crack the Reading market laid an egg. Murphy encouraged the Weis supermarket chain to take that best-selling flavor. But, "Nobody knew what Krak was. I should have given them buttercreams or coconut, something people had heard of," she says, chiding herself.

Even Murphy doesn't know the derivation of the name "Krak," or why in the 1940s the Zitners took the platter piled with eggs out of the hands of the bunny pictured on packages. (On the 1.8-ounce wrappers showing the mascot's full figure, his wide-armed stance makes him look like a *lapin* Fred Astaire.) The "cocoanut" on the Krak ingredient list is a 1930s spelling for real coconut, not a way to cover up using an artificial ingredient (as is now common in the food industry).

Murphy used to think people bought the

eggs "because they'd grown up eating them," but a 1998 company-commissioned survey revealed that it is largely because "they like the taste." She attributes that to superior, largely natural ingredients, product freshness and limited availability. The Zitner eggs you buy today were made on 17th Street within the past 16 weeks. Unlike bigger candy companies, Zitner does not warehouse its finished product or slap seasonal wrapping on year-round candy. Zitner eggs are only sold a few weeks a year and only here.

Zitner regularly sends out eggs to transplanted Philadelphians with Krak cravings in a money-losing goodwill mail-order operation. Murphy has yet to figure out how to send Butter Kraks to heaven, though a Philadelphia woman was once buried with some of the eggs. (Murphy's sister-in-law saw them in her open casket.)

No word on whether she died of a Krak overdose.

(cwyman@citypaper.net)

Zitner 1.8-ounce chocolate Easter eggs are sold at Wawa, CVS and many other drug and convenience stores for about 59 cents each. Multipacks and quarter-, half- and 1-pound sizes can be purchased at supermarkets and discount stores.



SPECIAL K: Butter Krak eggs range from 1.8-ounce treats to a 1-pound decorated egg, shown by Zitner CEO Christine Murphy.