

A BRITISH STAMP ON LUXURY CHOCOLATE

CHARBONNEL ET WALKER makes chocolate with a very British temper, says food writer Helenka Bednar

With a history stretching back to 1875, Charbonnel et Walker has made a mark in an industry dominated by French and Belgian chocolatiers. Cutting an English style of confectionery, the company holds an impressive Royal Warrant, regularly supplying chocolates to Her Majesty the Queen, and is revered as one of the UK's master chocolatiers.

Charbonnel et Walker is perhaps best known for its Pink Marc de Champagne Truffles. These sugar-dusted, indulgent mouthfuls have become the chocolatier's signature piece. Wrapped up in round, powder-pink boxes complete with gold trimming, the brandy-laced truffles have proved so popular that they have become the brand's bestseller. When you bite through the handmade chocolate shell, into the buttery ganache centre, you could be forgiven for reaching for a second. Polishing off an entire box isn't exactly a difficult business.

It was these famed pink truffles that caught the curiosity of Jennifer Earle, founder of London's Chocolate Ecstasy Tours. "I was given a box of Charbonnel's Pink Marc de Champagne Truffles for my birthday one year, and enjoyed them so much that I went in search of the store," she says. "It was such a beautiful shop, and so tucked away, that I thought, 'someone should be telling people about this place'. I've since taken hundreds of tours to visit Charbonnel et Walker's store to taste the pink Champagne truffles, and people frequently fall in love with their flavour."

Charbonnel et Walker came about largely due to King Edward VII. He coaxed Mme Charbonnel away from a chocolate boutique in Paris, convincing her to set up a fine confectionery house with Mrs Walker on London's New Bond Street. In the shop's infancy, Mme Charbonnel would make the truffles on the premises and lay them out on the shop roof to dry. Nowadays, all of Charbonnel et Walker's chocolates are handmade for an increasing number of customers at their Tunbridge Wells factory, with many of them still produced to Mme Charbonnel's original recipes.

From its flagship store that now sits on Old Bond Street, Charbonnel et Walker has expanded its boutiques with two additional London stores located in Canary Wharf and Liverpool Street railway station. The fourth UK store is based in the northern city of Leeds, while an international appetite for the company's chocolates saw their first shop and chocolate cafe open on the other side of the Atlantic in New York City's luxury department store, Sak's 5th Avenue, in 2005.

Sitting within Mayfair's Royal Arcade, the luxuriously-appointed flagship shop is used to rubbing shoulders with London's well-heeled shoppers. Throughout the years, sweet-toothed customers have included a slew of famous faces, such as Noel Coward and Sir John Gielgud. Noel Coward was so partial to Charbonnel et Walker's chocolates that he had a kilogram box sent to him every fortnight, no matter where he was in the world.

More recent fans include Paul McCartney, Stella McCartney, Freida Pinto, Eva Green and Hugh Bonneville, who have all pinpointed the confectioner for their chocolate fix. The company has long had links with the acting profession, and even staff who are jobbing actors are allowed to work their shifts at the Bond Street shop around auditions and shows.

When you walk into the flagship store, it's Charbonnel et Walker's packaging that offers up a serving of theatrical flair. Beautiful handmade boxes of truffles and chocolates line the shelves, in hues of cream, ochre and blushing pink. Lined with tissue paper and finished with flourishes of satin ribbon, the luxury wrapping echos the high quality of the chocolates they're encasing.

This British chocolatier has stamped a lasting legacy on today's burgeoning luxury chocolate market, embracing its old-world heritage along with new-world custom. With the company expanding further into Japan and Australia, its traditional English charm is continuing to woo modern palates around the globe, especially when it comes to those irresistibly decadent Pink Marc de Champagne Truffles.



Charbonnel et Walker's head chocolatier, Peter Irvine, at London's 41 Hotel

PHOTOGRAPHY: JAMIE MCGREGOR SMITH

Charbonnel et Walker Pink Marc de Champagne Truffles, £10, page 105



Q & A WITH PETER IRVINE, HEAD CHOCOLATIER

WHAT IS MARC DE CHAMPAGNE?

You'd be forgiven for thinking it's a Champagne, but Marc de Champagne is actually a brandy, produced by distilling the grape skins, seeds and stalks left over from the pressing process in the first stages of Champagne production.

HOW DO YOU MAKE THE PINK MARC DE CHAMPAGNE TRUFFLES?

Butter is folded into fine melted milk chocolate, then the brandy is added. This mixture is whisked into a thick ganache and encased in pink chocolate shells to form the truffles, then finished with a dusting of icing sugar.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE TASTE OF THE TRUFFLES?

The crispy, white chocolate shell is delicately flavoured with strawberry, giving way to rich ganache hinted with the unmistakable Marc de Champagne, all of which finishes sweetly on the palate.