

Chew on This

With ancient origins, chewing gum became a triumph of 20th-century mass marketing

BY SUE DE PASQUALE

On a sweltering afternoon, in the late 1920s, deep in the Yucatan rain forest, a nimble chiclero shimmies up the trunk of a 90-foot-tall sapodilla tree, hacking zigzags into the tree's gray bark with a machete. He releases an oozy, rubber-like substance known as chicle, which drips into waiting buckets below.

Over the next weeks, it will find its way to an eager American audience who will chew, chomp and pop the sought-after stuff...in the form of chewing and bubble gum.

Among American manufacturers of the popular product at the turn of the century, competition was stiff. "Anyone can make gum," noted the colorful William Wrigley Jr. "Selling it is the problem." Wrigley tackled the challenge by launching one of the first mass marketing campaigns of the 20th century: On placards in streetcars, huge electric signs in Times Square, billboards lining railroad tracks and through free samples sent to millions, Wrigley proclaimed the merits of his Wrigley's spearmint and Juicy Fruit chewing gum.

The result of such efforts? Gum became an ingredient key to American taste and culture. During World War II, American companies shipped 150 billion sticks of gum to GIs serving overseas, where it was a staple of the troops' military ration. At home, kids eagerly bought up and hoarded the pink stuff, cleverly packaged with baseball trading cards. After the war, consumption leapt by 500 percent, notes Michael Redclift,

author of *Chewing Gum: The Fortunes of Taste*.

The sweet, minty confection bore little semblance to the first known chewing gum, tree resin chewed by the ancient Aztecs. Gum derived from spruce tree resin gained popularity in the United States in the early 1800s—a habit borrowed from the American Indians. Entrepreneur John Baker Curtis commercialized the product—cutting it into strips covered in cornstarch to prevent sticking—and opened the world's first chewing gum factory in Portland, Maine, in 1852.

Enter the Yankee investor Thomas Adams, whose path crossed with exiled Mexican General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna (who won the Battle of the Alamo) in 1869. In New York, the general approached Adams with a lump of chicle. Its rubber-like qualities could make them a fortune, he predicted. Adams had no luck transforming the resin into vulcanized rubber—but he did start production on a chicle-based chewing gum.

In 1871, the first boxes of "Adams New York No. 1—Snapping and Stretching" chewing gum began flying off shelves. Adams and Son took their gum on the road and later added flavors—including licorice to produce "Black Jack gum," still around today. The market for the chewy stuff was born, and soon, other manufacturing



companies entered the fray. Wrigley emerged as the biggest winner: At the time of his death in 1932, he was one of the 10 richest men in the U.S., with factories in 37 countries.

By the 1950s, manufacturers shifted to synthetic forms of gum, partly sparked by Frank H. Fleer, who wanted a gum that could be blown into bubbles. He spent two decades experimenting with synthetic bases, eventually marketing the first bubble gum, "Blibber-Blubber," in 1906. But when it exploded on the face, it had to be removed with turpentine. Fleer accountant Walter Diemer solved that issue in 1928 with a pink mixture—dubbed Double Bubble—that easily peeled away.

Today most chewing gum is manufactured from vinyl resins or micro-crystalline waxes. But chicle and chewing gum have come full circle. In an era when organic products and preserving the rain forest are in vogue, chicle-based gums are making a comeback as a boutique industry for those favoring all-natural products. ■