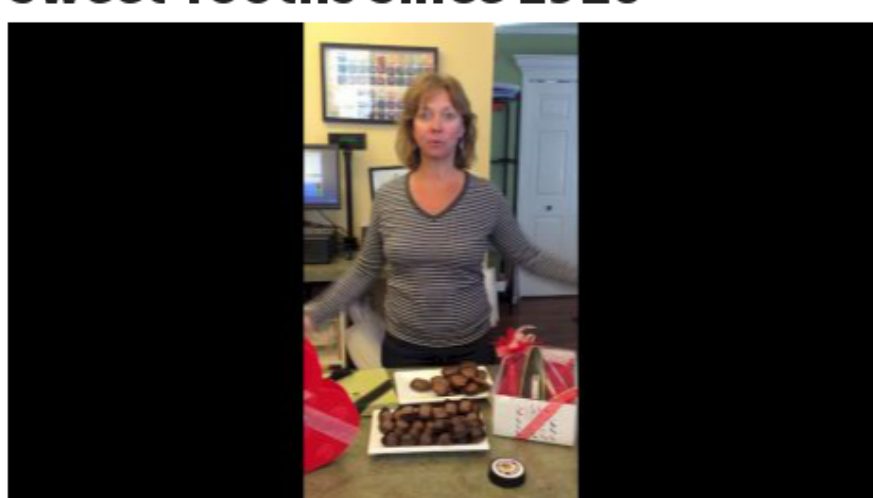


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Morkes Chocolates: Satisfying Sweet Teeth Since 1920



Morkes Chocolates was founded in Chicago in 1920, and has been located in Palatine since 1967. Credit: Angela Sykora

Walking into Morkes Chocolates in Palatine can make any grown-up feel like a giddy kid. The selection can be dizzying—hand-dipped chocolates, toffee, fudge, salt water taffy, caramel apples, homemade doughnuts and more.

With so many businesses closing nearly as quickly as they opened, third-generation owned Morkes is an institution that is here to stay.

William Morkes Sr., who was a Nabisco cookie salesman, opened his namesake store on the southwest side of Chicago in 1920

while he was still in his early twenties. In 1967, Morkes moved to Rand Road in Palatine, and was managed by William Morkes Jr. His sister, Rhonda, Dehn, the youngest of seven kids, took over in 1988.

Such longevity is rare. According to business experts, only 13 percent of family-owned businesses are passed down successfully to a third generation.

Dehn's strategy for continued success is to uphold high standards for quality, keep prices fair, and constantly develop new products.

"We blend the tradition of a classic candy store with our innovative ideas," said Dehn, who has a staff of 25, including a full-time baker, two full-time molders and two full-time candy makers.

Morkes also operates a store in Algonquin and a manufacturing space in Lake Zurich. Eventually, Dehn would like to add an outlet store to that location, with windows where customers can watch the chocolates being made.

Dehn, who does not possess an MBA, and actually majored in dance in college, said she always knew she wanted own business. For 25 years, she has worked hard to keep the Morke family's entrepreneurial spirit alive.

"The biggest lesson I've learned is you can't be everything to everyone. Focus on what you do best, and the market will come to you."

Indeed. Morkes receives orders from around globe. Their hand-dipped chocolates are made from scratch, and it's not as easy as you might think. Hand-dipped cherry cordials are the most time-consuming confection to make.

"It's a lost art," said Dehn, who is a member of the Retail Confectioners International's Board of Directors.

For those who want to try their hand at the hand-dip, Morkes offers classes at their Palatine location. They also host birthday parties, chocolate making parties and walk-in chocolate days where customers can learn to make a treat on the spot.

Staying Modern

As steeped in tradition as Morkes is, they keep up with confectionary trends, producing unique molded creations such as a made-to-order chocolate John Hancock Center and an anatomically correct heart, which has been featured on the Food Network show "Unwrapped."

Academy Award organizers even officially approved the company's three-dimensional Oscar statuette dusted in gold-colored powdered sugar. The chocolate statues come in male and female molds and are hugely popular.

"We sell hundreds for Oscar parties, and for school awards," said Dehn.

To celebrate the opening of the "Sex and the City," Morkes created hand-decorated, chocolate high heels in various sizes. They even make cowboy boots and platform shoes.

Recently, Morkes filled a special order for a local hospital wanting to thank its 500 employees for enduring a power outage with pure professionalism—mini molded light bulbs.

In addition to chocolates, Morkes makes caramel apples that fly off the shelves in the fall, along with homemade apple cider doughnuts. Morkes makes doughnuts daily and offers a "doughnut of the month." This month's flavor is fresh blueberry.

"We make really good doughnuts," said Dehn.

With the busy Christmas season behind them, Morkes is gearing up for the Valentine's Day rush. Besides boxed chocolates, the most popular item is chocolate-dipped strawberries presented in Morkes custom-made, heart-shaped box, which is deeper to fit the treats perfectly.

Just don't expect to wander in a week before Valentine's Day to buy them. That's a no-no, said Dehn, who won't sell her dipped strawberries any earlier than two days before the holiday to ensure the utmost freshness.

Visit Morkes Chocolates at 1890 N. Rand Rd. in Palatine, and at 2755 W. Algonquin Rd. in Algonquin.

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