

Peppermint Pigs A Smashing Tradition In NY

MICHAEL HILL, Associated Press

SARATOGA SPRINGS, N.Y. (AP) — A holiday tradition in this upstate New York resort town has a peppermint twist: pig-shaped hard candies are sold with little metal hammers to smash them at Christmas.

The peppermint pigs, which can weigh up to a pound, are considered good luck charms by some. Family members will take turns whacking the piggy tokens of holiday cheer into little candy shards.

"We do find that some people are a little taken aback: 'What's the whole idea of the pig and the hammer? What are you doing? And is someone insulting me by giving me a pig?'" said Mike Fitzgerald, owner of Saratoga Sweets, which makes the pigs that can be the size of a big bar of bath soap.

Fitzgerald has pigs on his brain this time of year. A small crew at his shop south of Saratoga Springs in Halfmoon makes the hard candy from dawn to dark in a shop distinguished by boiling red pots of candy and an overwhelming scent of peppermint. Fitzgerald is hurrying to fill thousands of pig orders around the country.

Why pigs?

It could be related to the marzipan pigs northern European confectioners make at holiday time as good luck symbols. Fitzgerald said it's possible chefs at the old hotels in Saratoga Springs in the late 19th century couldn't easily make marzipan, so they improvised with peppermint hard candy.

In the old days, the pig was placed on the Christmas dinner table. Father would wrap it in a napkin and crack it with the steel rod used to sharpen knives so the family could share the sweet-tasting bits, Fitzgerald said. But by the mid-20th century, the area holiday tradition went the way of lit candles on Christmas trees.

In 1988, Fitzgerald made a first run of 60 peppermint pigs at the request of the local historical society. He was surprised to see people lining up to buy them, many of them older people who fondly recalled smashing pigs when they were young. He sold out his run and never looked back.

"It's been a pig race ever since. This year we'll make about 130,000 pigs," he said.

As Fitzgerald spoke, workers stirred bubbling tea pots filled with a Pepto-pink mix of sugar and corn syrup. The candy mix is hand-poured into cast aluminum molds to make one of three pigs: Holly (3 ounces and 3 1/2-inches long), Noel (a half pound and 5 1/2 inches) or the big man, Clarence (1 pound and 6 inches).

The hardened pigs have a shiny, glassy quality other hard candies with a higher

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Published on Food Manufacturing (<http://www.foodmanufacturing.com>)

corn syrup content lack. A quick strike by Fitzgerald's hammer shattered a pig.

"It has to break like glass," Fitzgerald said with satisfaction.

It's not as though sales of candy canes — more than 1.8 billion are made a year — are being threatened. But the pigs are a popular item in gift stores in Saratoga Springs and other retailers, dressed in red velvet bags with a shiny, silver hammer. (Once you get the hammer, you can order a refill without one.)

"Thanksgiving sort of kicks it off and from here on in, it gets crazy," said Marianne Barker of Impressions of Saratoga.

And the pigs have extended beyond their upstate New York habitat through online sales and catalogs. In Georgia, Lynn Barlow bought a pig on a lark in 1997 and shared it with her family on Christmas. A good luck streak followed that included a raise for her husband, one son bagging the biggest buck of his life and another son's team winning a basketball tournament.

The White, Ga., resident said pigs have been passed around at the holiday table ever since, now with grandchildren taking a turn with the hammer.

"My husband hits it first," Barlow said, "and then the peppermint is hard, so we usually go around the table twice just because the kids enjoy doing it so much."

Source URL (retrieved on 04/28/2015 - 12:12pm):

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