



The Candy Man Cometh

'Max' Brenner's Willy Wonka-ish Fantasies Come to Life



Oded 'Max' Brenner

EVERY CHILD DREAMS of a place like Max Brenner. Imagine a café in which you are literally surrounded by chocolate in every form: solid slabs, powders, confections of myriad shapes and sizes, even vats sending molten brown liquid through pipes overhead. A restaurant where you not only are allowed, but encouraged, to play with your food, whether you order mud cake, chocolate pizza, squirt-in-your-mouth chocolate syringes or rub-it-all-over cocoa butter-based body creams.

"It's a place where people can eat chocolate, drink chocolate, smell chocolate, touch chocolate," says the quick-to-laugh Brenner himself, "... almost experience any kind of chocolate fantasy they have in their minds."

When Brenner's largest-ever emporium branch—all 9,400 square feet of it—opens in Las Vegas this August at The Forum Shops, it will be his fantasy come true.

"Almost since I started this concept, everyone was talking about Vegas: 'It's the perfect match to Vegas. You must do it there,'" Brenner says from New York. "It's so sensual, so fantastic. To come to Vegas, it's almost like fulfilling a dream."

Max Brenner—for those who haven't heard the name—is one of the biggest international successes to emerge from Israel in the last decade. Beginning from a single shop in the Tel Aviv suburb of Ra'anana 13 years ago, the brand has grown to 29 worldwide locations, including six in Israel, 18 in Australia, two in the Philippines, and one each in Singapore, New York City and Philadelphia. The location in NYC's Union Square, Brenner claims, profits close to \$10 million annually, including \$2 million in takeaway retail (and profits actually went up 15 percent during last year's difficult economy).

"On the weekends, we have almost 2,000 people

a day. I don't think there are many chocolate stores that do these numbers."

If Brenner, 41, sounds a bit boastful, it is because he is accustomed to critiques from the food press that his restaurant-boutiques are more tourist than gourmand destinations. There's no denying that he is bucking today's artisanal, single-estate and savory chocolate trends.

"All this sophistication, it's nice," he says, "but it's almost like having a specialized cigar shop.

"Chocolate, for people, it's not just about taste," he elaborates. "It's something much more profound. We human beings have a very complex relationship with this product. It's not just like a tomato. We are very emotional about it—in a good way."

Brenner has been compared, predictably, to Willy Wonka (a character also with some Jewish resonance—at least in the hands of original film director Mel Stuart and portrayer Gene Wilder), but there is also some surprising philosophical depth and business vision below the frivolity.

"When I was talking to customers in my first little chocolate store in Israel," Brenner relates, "they had so many emotional associations about chocolate—like a fantasy, like the most romantic gift, the most sensual, putting it on the body and licking it. Something very exclusive on one hand, and on the other hand, a crazy addiction.

"And all these emotions were not expressed in the place where they were supposed to experience it. When they went to a chocolate store, it was limited to one aspect of chocolate ... these stores in the style of Godiva, Leonidas, selling it almost like jewelry—don't touch—very exclusive, almost intimidating."

Perhaps ironically, Brenner had himself trained with some of Europe's best—Georg Maushagen in Germany, Michel Chaudun and Auguste Fauchon in Paris—for more than five years before opening, at age 27, what he says was something of a pioneering, fancy chocolate shop in Israel. Chocolate was not his passion, though; the entire vocation had begun as a way to finance his ambitions as a novelist.

"I have to admit," Brenner laughs, "I'm not a typical chef, or in a way, not a chef at all."

It is important to point out that Max Brenner was named after the business, not vice versa. Oded Brenner, his real name, only became Max Brenner after the store was named by combining Brenner's last name and his original partner Max Fichtman's first. Following a split with Fichtman, Tom Haikin came with an offer to franchise the store in Australia, buying into Brenner's then-untested, fantastical vision. Everyone mistakenly began calling Oded "Max" in Australia, and after awhile, it became pointless to correct them. Yet, when Brenner



Chocolate Pizza

talks about "Max Brenner" in the third person, it's not from a place of egotism; it is apparent that he has altered his persona to fit the restaurant concept.

And that concept is undeniably unique, with its avant-garde dishware featuring energetic graphic designs and innovations such as the Hug Mug, a cacao bean-shaped mug that keeps your hands warm while drinking; Kangaroo cup, a special coffee cup honoring the relationship between coffee and chocolate by incorporating a pocket for the chocolate; and Suckkao fondue cup that is uniquely designed to prepare and drink a pure shot of chocolate, as well as confections named Snowies and Dark Chicao. All of which Brenner is happy to share credit for with his longtime, dedicated core team.

"On the graphic design, it's a guy called

Yonathan Factor. We've worked together almost 12 years. He's between a graphic designer and an artist, a one-man show, and it's really his language, the style you see there. I come with a very clear idea of what I want, I do all the text writing, and he translates it into the graphic."

Brenner and Factor even collaborated on a cookbook with the expected MB twist. *Chocolate: A Love Story* offers 65 recipes from Brenner's "private collection," accompanied by impressive modern and post-modern graphics that are at least half of the appeal. (The other half, for Brenner at least, is that he is finally a published author.)

"Utensil design is done by another that has been working with me from the beginning, Iris Zohar, and she's done this very unique collection of what we call chocolate drinking

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– Max Brenner

ceremony utensils that are telling a story, creating something that was never there before—a ceremony of drinking chocolate. It’s very developed in wine, it’s very developed in coffee; but in chocolate, it was just simple mugs. We gave a meaning almost to how you should drink chocolate, and why. We have a very extensive line, from cappuccino mugs to the Hug Mug. Now, we’re doing plates with stories and special designs.

“The architect is also an Israeli guy who has been with me from the beginning, Yaron Tal. I’m almost like a movie director in this aspect. I very much lead the design, the style. And of course, everybody works together; it’s a brainstorming process. But it’s very minimal, there’s no design company here, there’s no marketing team. It’s still a small, very exclusive team creating this story from the beginning.”

For the savory menu, which Brenner developed only when the concept came to America in 2006, the bald man connected with New York’s Chef Chris Santos of The Stanton Social to create dishes that emphasize quality and flavors that would pair well with chocolate, but which kept the chocolate to a minimum (the brunch menu, which Brenner is most bullish about, may be the exception to that).

“We created together a delicious food menu that speaks to everybody, that is very harmonious with this place,” says Brenner. “But there is no trying to mix chocolate with the savory. It’s just about super-delicious comfort food that talks to everybody. Our slogan for this was, because I always remember my mother telling me this, ‘First food, then chocolate.’”

“The retail world today is like theater. People don’t come to Max Brenner, or an Abercrombie store, just because of a functional need. They come to entertain themselves, and they want something that has all these aspects of story: theme, beautiful people, aesthetics, music.”

One gets the sense that Brenner has expressed his philosophy many (probably thousands) of times before, yet, it doesn’t seem rehearsed. In fact, his English is still somewhat awkward. The husband and father of one also admits he isn’t even a sophisticated chocolate fancier himself—he prefers the



populist milk chocolate with nuts over dark cacao. But, in the same breath, he explains that the company, still based in Israel, processes its own chocolate from raw beans—a rarity in the confection world (most buy from Barry Callebaut, Chocolats Valrhona or other suppliers).

“I really believe in blending. I think it makes the best chocolate, more than one origin, because blending gives you different effects and different aromas from each bean.” Practically everything that doesn’t come from Israel is made on-premises in the stores.

Despite the economic climate—not to mention a plethora of existing chocolate options in Vegas, from Vosges to Ethel M—Brenner is optimistic about the new emporium.

“Our business model fits the time. First, people can get an unbelievable experience—the design, the utensils, the level of service, the level of uniqueness, the level of food, everything is very high-end, but at a check that is not expensive, \$18 for a whole meal. The second thing is psychological. It’s chocolate, one of the major comforting (foods), and maybe people come more because it’s chocolate. They get happiness from it. It’s a

challenge, but we’re very optimistic.”

And Brenner believes his store will fit Vegas’ international tourist clientele perfectly. Other than Americans’ affection for combining peanut butter and marshmallows with chocolate, he says he hasn’t seen any difference at all between customers in different countries.

“Everybody loves it the same way. Maybe,” he thinks aloud, “it’s a good ingredient to making peace around the world?” - **E.C. Gladstone**

■ Veteran journalist **E.C. Gladstone** has profiled celebrities, moguls, chefs and daredevils for a wide variety of national print and online publications including *Rolling Stone*, *AOL*, *Ocean Drive*, *Flaunt*, *Seventeen*, *Premiere* (Japan) among many others. He has also contributed locally to *Las Vegas Magazine*, *Las Vegas Home & Design* and *Las Vegas Weekly*. He is a former editor at *Grand Royal* and *Raygun* magazines, a former contributing editor at *Alternative Press* and *VEGAS* magazines, a former staff writer at *US Weekly*, and currently the Los Angeles blogger for *HauteLiving.com*. He is a *fresser*, and was bar mitzvaed by Rabbi Stephen S. Pearce.