On Campus

How Mondel Chocolates Became the Sweetest Shop on Broadway

Candy is king at this eighty-year-old neighborhood staple.

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Whenever Paula Blat gets out of the subway at West 116th Street on her way to work and sees large white tents set up on campus, she thinks, “Oh, we’re going to

be busy.” Whether it’s Alumni Weekend, Homecoming, or Commencement, Paula knows that people will be lined up out the door of Mondel Chocolates, at Broadway and 114th. They will come into the small shop, look around at the stuffed shelves of confections and tchotchkes, the boxes of red, pink, blue, and gold, and the handwritten signs and say, “The place hasn’t changed at all!” They will order the chocolates they fell in love with as students: hazelnut truffles, mint squares, cordial cherries. Some will claim that they were there when Katharine Hepburn, who lived on East 49th Street, came in to order her usual: pecan turtles, molasses chips, butter crunch, dark-chocolate orange peel, champagne truffles, and dark-chocolate almond bark — now sold as the Hepburn Mix.

Perhaps more than anything, alumni return to Mondel’s for a taste of simpler times. The computer age and the modern world in general have barely permeated the shop or its proprietors. “People love the old-fashioned feeling,” Paula says. This statement is punctuated, as if on cue, by the *ring-a-ling-a-ling* of an old telephone in the back office.

Mondel’s is a mom-and-pop shop in the literal sense, and one of the last of its kind in the neighborhood. It is also one of the oldest. The founder, Carl Mondel, who immigrated to America from Hungary, once stated that he opened the store in 1944, though others say 1943. In the 1970s, Carl’s daughter, Florence, took over the business, and around thirty years ago, Paula and her husband, Jack, looking for something new, answered an ad and came to work at the store. They fell in love with it and bought into the business, becoming partners with Florence. Now that Florence has retired, it’s just the Blats, their customers, and eighty years of history.



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On a recent Thursday, while Paula weighed out caramels for a Barnard student, Jack was in the back office carefully packing orders (someone at Columbia needed fifty boxed assortments for an event). The Blats, who were born in Eastern Europe and live in Brooklyn, are modest. They don't seek publicity, and when it comes knocking, they peer through the peephole before opening the door. But, as with a raspberry truffle, once you get past their shells, they are all sweetness and delight.

"Chocolate makes people feel good," says Paula, who has a ready laugh that jingles like shop bells. "It's interesting: on a rainy day, you think, 'Oh, it's gloomy, no one is out,' and then suddenly we're so busy — people come in here to cheer themselves up."

While Mondel's offers such consolations five days a week, it is a holiday-based business: Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, Valentine's Day (with the heart-shaped boxes perpetually on the shelves, every day is Valentine's Day at Mondel's), Easter, Mother's Day, Father's Day. Mondel's also ships all over the country. This keeps the Blats tending shop most of the year. "The best thing about working here," says Paula, "is meeting people. And the customers are so grateful. They want *us* to be happy. Many times they say, 'Please don't close.' They really

have a panic attack!” Paula laughs. “It’s very gratifying.”

Jack pops out from the back to help Paula at the counter, and the two of them muse on other celebrities who have dropped by. “Lauren Bacall came in here a couple of times when she went to visit Katharine Hepburn,” says Paula. Jack recalls meeting Kirk Douglas shortly before the actor’s death. “He was in a car,” Jack says, “and I brought him some chocolates.” “No, his agent came in,” Paula corrects him. Jack doesn’t argue. He says, “And Douglas wrote us a note that said, ‘Chocolates were great, thank you.’”

But for the Blats, it’s the neighbors — many of them Columbia faculty, staff, students, and graduates — who really sweeten their lives behind the counter. “Everybody comes here,” says Paula. “You really learn about the world, standing in this little store.”

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