



SMALL BATCHES AND
SWEET TRADITIONS:

MIKE TOFFLER OF THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY

BY JENNA KASHOU
PHOTOS BY DAVID SZYMANSKI

Mike Toffler has been in the happiness business since 1972, slinging sundaes and subs at The Chocolate Factory. Toffler owned an ice cream shop on Milwaukee's East Side when Peter Blommer, who was in the chocolate business, approached him to open a shop in Cedarburg.

Equal parts nostalgia and originality, The Chocolate Factory started as an ice cream shop and soda fountain then quickly expanded to serve sandwiches and salads, as well. The business was designed on the back of a napkin and the first menu was hand printed. It's come a long way since then, offering online ordering, quick pick up, a smartphone app, gluten-free bread and even catering.

Now with eight locations in Southeastern Wisconsin, stretching from West Bend to Oconomowoc to Oak Creek, The Chocolate Factory is sticking to what it does best — small batches and premium quality. Toffler shares why he still has fun at work every day after more than 40 years.

IS THERE CONFUSION WITH THE NAME — A SANDWICH SHOP CALLED THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY?

We came up with the name The Chocolate Factory because of Peter's family's involvement in the chocolate business. We intended to just serve ice cream, but then a customer approached me and told me we couldn't just serve ice cream, because it gets really cold outside. It's a funny story, actually. I said, "Yeah, I want to add sandwiches like at George Watts Café" and he replied, "That's me. I am George Watts!" He took me downtown and showed me his operation and we've had a relationship ever since.

We started calling the sandwiches "heroes." That's what sandwiches were called out East where I grew up, but after explaining it many times, we just started calling them subs. Now we just put a tagline in the logo so people know that we serve sub sandwiches and ice cream.

WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF MAKING YOUR SANDWICHES SO DARN GOOD? IS THERE A SECRET INGREDIENT?

We just started putting things together, remembering what the subs tasted like out East and testing out different places. We put our own spin on things by putting ovens in all the stores so that when you get a sub from us, you'll always get a warm, lightly crusted roll, freshly baked in small batches all day.

Each sandwich gets a generous shake of oregano, and there is a secret ingredient in the mayo, which I can't reveal or otherwise I'd have to kill you. And people really love the pepper bar with the hot pepper relish.

WHY DO YOU THINK SODA FOUNTAINS WENT AWAY?

People don't get it. My first job in high school was being a soda jerk at a drug store and I learned a lot there. It was a place where people gathered and connected. The nostalgia is coming back a little bit. We try to incorporate a little of it into the stores with the décor and the phosphates, old-fashioned root beer floats and banana splits.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO STAY IN BUSINESS FOR AS LONG AS YOU HAVE?

You have to know how to hire the right people and treat them the way you would want to be treated. We have managers that have been with us for 35 years and employees for as long as 15 years. Be honest and up front with everyone. And train them within an inch of their life! **MKE**