

Candy makers cut the calories, by cutting the size

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M&M'S, the Mars Snackfood brand, has stirred up the candy dish in recent years, introducing the M&M Premiums line with flavors like chocolate almond, mint chocolate and mocha as well as a Web site, Mymms.com, where customers can personalize the candies with words, logos and pictures.

Now its rival, the Hershey Company, is expanding too, with the introduction of three varieties modeled after its Reese's Pieces: Almond Joy Pieces, York Pieces and Hershey's Special Dark Pieces.

In a new television ad, by the New York office of Arnold Worldwide, part of Havas, which had its premiere this week, an actress by a pool reaches for an unopened Almond Joy bar. Just as her hand touches the brown, white and blue package, it transforms into brown, white and blue Almond Joy Pieces, which, smiling, she pops into her mouth.

The same transformation occurs when others in the spot reach for a York peppermint pattie (blue and white package, blue and white candies), Hershey's Special Dark candy bar (black, red and maroon candies) and Reese's Peanut Butter Cup (orange, yellow and brown candies). At the close of the spot, a voiceover says, "Your favorites — now in Pieces."

Jody Cook, a Hershey spokeswoman, said the new offerings gave devotees of the brands more options. "Consumers needed something that was easy to snack on when on the go," Ms. Cook said. "You can just grab a couple and pop them in your mouth from a bowl or bag."

Hershey contends that rather than cannibalizing sales of, for example, York patties, York Pieces will entice consumers who eat the traditional form in a private setting to share a bag of Pieces in a social setting. "I think you're going to move into more usage occasions with this delivery method," Ms. Cook said.

Hershey recently conducted what it called a "wrapper reward program." The first 25,000 consumers who mailed in wrappers from full-size versions of an Almond Joy bar, Hershey's Special Dark bar, York peppermint pattie, or Reese's peanut butter cup were mailed back a coupon for a free bag of the smaller product.

The promotion was announced at Hershey's Times Square store in an event on Jan. 29 featuring the singer and actress Ashlee Simpson-Wentz who, marketing materials said, "first achieved success in her music career with her debut song 'Pieces of Me.'" Within two weeks, the company received the 25,000 wrappers, Ms. Cook said.

Hershey is hoping to fare better than it did in supermarket cookie aisles: Almond Joy Cookies, York Cookies and Reese's Cookies, introduced around 2005, were recently discontinued.

On the popular candy blog named, appropriately enough, Candy Blog, Cybele May reviewed all three of the new varieties, and was most enthusiastic about Almond Joy Pieces, which have a milk chocolate base and bits of coconut and almond.

"The texture combinations are fantastic," Ms. May wrote, lauding "the light crunch of candy shell combined with the chew of coconut bits and the occasional appearance of an almond bit."

She could not corral as much enthusiasm for York Pieces, however. Ms. May had hoped that, just as the center of Reese's Pieces resembles those of peanut butter cups, York Pieces would have a peppermint pattie's creamy white fondant. But it turns out that York Pieces are instead filled with dark chocolate that is flavored with peppermint.

"It begs the question, what is the essence of a York peppermint patty?" asked Ms. May, who, although she found the York Pieces to be toothsome and rated them 8 on a scale 10, was flummoxed by the lack of fondant.

"I am confused by the Yorklessness of these little pieces," she wrote.

"Logistically because of the size of the piece, the fondant inside would have been very small," Ms. Cook, of Hershey, explained in an e-mail message. "So, we did some consumer research on the flavor profile, and consumers really liked the chocolate with peppermint oil with the candy coating. It delivers on the expectation for both dark chocolate and peppermint that York delivers in its standard size."

Marcia Mogelonsky, a senior analyst at Mintel, a market research firm, said Hershey "might get in trouble" for forgoing the fondant in York Pieces, and compared it to what some considered a misstep by Kraft when, during the low-calorie craze a few years ago, it introduced the 100-calorie-pack of Nabisco Oreo Thin Crisps, which lacked the guiltiest pleasure of Oreos: the cream filling.

Ms. Mogelonsky, who referred to the trend over the last several years to offer candy in reduced-calorie packs as "Honey, I shrank the chocolates," said the expansion of the Pieces line could resonate with consumers who increasingly want to control portions — both for themselves and their children.

"If you're trying to watch your weight, or your kid's sugar intake, a candy bar is a big deal," Ms. Mogelonsky said. "But if you don't want to overdo sugar in your obese kid's lunchbox, you can still put a few Almond Joy Pieces in there."

While few have the willpower to open a candy bar and eat only half, the ability to customize portions with button-size candies might help a person hit the brakes.

"The point is that it gives people the option to eat less and more sensibly," Ms. Mogelonsky said. "Sure, half of us are going to pour the whole bag into our mouths, but some are going to exercise restraint."

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