

Caramel, butter cream, liqueur, trail mix, truffles, marzipan pralines, difficult to chose for every chocolate addict, who wishes to buy a gift or eat a little chocolate without gaining weight. “Luxury pralines are not only for people with high income, but also for those who want to buy a special gift and Romanians have learnt from the western people in the past few years, how positive is the reaction of the person who receives it.” Jolyon Salvatore M'Bei, general manager of Leonidas chocolate store tells Bucharest Herald. Born in Turnu- Magurele, with studies completed in Switzerland and France, Jolyon Salvatore M'Bei travelled all over the world by 2001 when he decided to set up a business in a completely new area for Romania: luxury chocolate. He brought Leonidas chocolate from Belgium and started selling it in a store on Str Doamnei. The initial investment was worth 100,000 Euro, an amount difficult to recover, considering that in the first two years, the store posted losses, because the products were sold at prices under the import prices, to gain customers.

BH: When did you start selling Leonidas chocolate in Romania?

Jolyon Salvatore M'Bei: We opened the first Leonidas store on Str Doamnei in 2001 and at that time it was the first store selling luxury chocolate in Romania. Everybody was sceptical about it and though we would not adjust to this market, lacking completely the chocolate culture.

BH: Why a luxury chocolate store? How did you come up with this idea?

Jolyon Salvatore M'Bei: It was my mother's idea. We were living in Africa and once, when she came to Romania she gave some chocolate bought from Romania, to a lady, as a gift. The lady unwrapped the chocolate box and served my mother and my mother did not like the taste at all. And this is when she realised that Romania needs chocolate stores and the whole business started from here. My parents were retired, I had just got back from France where I had graduated from a sports management PhD and I decided to come to Romania to open this store with my mother.

BH: How difficult was it to establish the brand on the market?

Jolyon Salvatore M'Bei: It was very difficult, because I was not used to the bureaucracy in Romania. When I went to the Trade Registry to register the company I had to wait in many queues without knowing why, because no clerk was giving any indications. In the first two years we sold chocolate posting losses, to attract the customers. The customs expenses were 42 per cent of the products' value, to which the transport added. The contract with the Belgian firm obliged us to make orders every week, which was very difficult, because all the operations had to happen very fast. We renegotiated this term and we ended up making orders every two weeks.

BH: When did you earn the first money?

Jolyon Salvatore M'Bei: After the second Christmas a company ordered 100 kilos of chocolate, a very high quantity. From that moment on things started to move in the right direction.

BH: How many stores do you have in Romania?

Jolyon Salvadore M'Bei: We have three stores in Bucharest and resellers in the country, in Galati, Constanta, Targu Mures. We also sold chocolate to 4 and 5 star hotels, among which Athenee Palace Hilton and Howard Johnson.

BH : Did you face the Romanian consumers' preconceptions generated by the lack of knowledge regarding the luxury chocolate?

Jolyon Salvadore M'Bei: In a country like Romania, that did not have at the moment when we started the business, the chocolate culture, it was necessary and it is still necessary to explain to the customers why they have to pay larger amounts for chocolate: because this chocolate is made of superior quality cocoa and other ingredients and freshness is its most important quality. Leonidas chocolate comes to Romania, ten days after being produced, while in the supermarkets there is a few months old chocolate.

BH: What are the best selling chocolate products?

Jolyon Salvadore M'Bei: The pralines are the most wanted and in terms of price, the sugar free pralines, sweetened with maltitol and those with liqueur are the most expensive. Milk chocolate is definitely the best selling chocolate in Romania, of all the chocolate types, but black chocolate is gaining ground, considering that the customers get informed and realise the benefits of black chocolate. Moreover Leonidas will launch a few new products this year, among which some pralines which dissolve in milk and of which hot chocolate is made. We also have ice- cream and champagne.

BH: Do you plan to open an exterior terrace for the customers who want to spend more time in the store for a coffee and some chocolate? ☐

Jolyon Salvadore M'Bei: We will not do this for the time being, but we are considering this option in the future. This summer we will reorganize the interior space and we will also add some small tables. The interior design will also render the new Leonidas style, a style which can already be found in the other two stores in Bucharest. The store will be closed for refurbishment by September. We would also like to bring Belgian pastry in the store.

About Leonidas:

Leonidas is a Belgian chocolate brand that was born at the beginning of the 1910s, when the confectioner Leonidas Kestekides, who won a bronze and a gold medal in an important sweets contest, moved to Brussels and opened the first confectionery. In the almost 100 years of existence, over 100 types of Leonidas chocolate were invented, sold in 1,400 stores all over the world. Peanuts from Turkey, Morello cherries from Perigord, almonds from Italy and nuts from Grenoble are among the unique ingredients.

Jolyon M'Bei: “Doi ani am vandut ciocolata belgiana in pierdere, acum romanii cumpara si cate un kilogram o data.”

Praline cu caramel, crema de unt, lichior, fructe seci, trufe, martipan, greu de ales pentru orice impatimit al ciocolatei, care doreste sa faca un cadou sau sa savureze putina ciocolata fara a lua kilograme in plus. “Pralinele de lux nu sunt doar pentru oamenii cu venituri mari, ci pentru toti cei care vor sa faca un cadou deosebit, iar romanii au invatat de la vestici in ultimii ani, ce reactie pozitiva are o persoana care primeste un astfel de cadou.” povesteste pentru Bucharest Herald Jolyon Salvadore M'Bei, directorul general al ciocolateriei Leonidas. Nascut la Turnu- Magurele, cu studii definitive in Elvetia si Franta, Jolyon Salvadore M'Bei a calatorit peste tot in lume pana in 2001 cand a hotarat sa inceapa o afacere intr-un domeniu complet nou pentru Romania: ciocolata de lux. A adus din Belgia ciocolata Leonidas si a inceput sa o comercializeze intr-un magazin pe Str Doamnei. Investitia initiala s-a ridicat la 100.000 de Euro, o suma greu de recuperat, avand in vedere ca in primii doi ani a vandut in pierdere, la preturi sub preturile de import, pentru a casiga clienti.

BH: Cand ati inceput sa vindeti ciocolata “Leonidas” in Romania?

Jolyon Salvadore M'Bei: Am deschis primul magazin Leonidas pe Str Doamnei in 2001, iar la momentul respectiv era primul magazine care comercializa ciocolata de lux in Romania. Toata lumea era sceptica in aceasta privinta si credea ca nu ne vom adapta la aceasta piata in care cultura ciocolatei lipsea cu desavarsire.

BH: De ce un magazin cu ciocolata de lux? Cum v-a venit aceasta idee?

Jolyon Salvadore M'Bei: A fost ideea mamei mele. Noi locuiam in Africa si la un moment dat, cand s-a intors in Romania i-a facut cadou unei doamne ciocolata cumparata din magazinele din tara. Doamna respectiva a desfacut ciocolata, a servit-o pe mama si mamei nu i-a placut deloc gustul. Si atunci a constientizat ca in Romania este nevoie de ciocolaterii si de aici a pornit toata afacerea. Parintii mei ieseau la pensie, eu tocmai ma intorsesem din Franta unde terminasem un doctorat in management sportiv si am hotarat sa vin in Romania si sa deschid acest magazin impreuna cu mama mea.

BH: Cat de greu a fost sa impuneti acest brand pe piata?

Jolyon Salvadore M'Bei: A fost extrem de greu pentru ca nu eram obisnuit cu birocratia din Romania. Cand am fost la Registrul Comertului sa inregistrez firma erau foarte multe cozi la care stateam fara sa stiu de ce, pentru ca niciun functionar nu dadea indicatii. In primii doi ani am vandut in pierdere pentru a atrage clienti. Cheltuielile de vama erau 42 la suta din valoarea produsului, la care se adauga transportul. Contractul cu firma din Belgia ne obliga sa facem comenzi in fiecare saptamana, lucru care era foarte dificil, pentru ca toate operatiunile trebuiau sa se intample foarte repede. Ulterior am renegociat aceasta clauza si am ajuns sa facem comenzi la doua saptamani.

BH: Cand au aparut primele castiguri?

Jolyon Salvadore M'Bei: Dupa al doilea Craciun o firma a comandat 100 de kilograme de ciocolata, o cantitate foarte mare. Din acel moment lucurile au inceput sa se miste in directia buna.

BH: Cate magazine aveti in Romania?

Jolyon Salvatore M'Bei: Avem trei magazine in Bucuresti si revanzatori in tara, in Galati, Constanta, Targu Mures. Am vandut ciocolata si catre hoteluri, de 4 si 5 stele, printre care Athenee Palace Hilton si Howard Johnson.

BH : V-ati confruntat cu prejudecatile romanilor, generate de lipsa de cunostinte in ceea ce priveste ciocolata de lux?

Jolyon Salvatore M'Bei: Intr-o tara ca Romania, care nu avea la momentul in care am inceput aceasta afacere, cultura ciocolatei, era nevoie si este nevoie in continuare sa i se explice clientului de ce trebuie sa plateasca sume mai mari pentru ciocolata: pentru ca aceasta ciocolata este facuta din cacao si alte ingrediente de calitate superioara si cea mai importanta calitate a sa este prospetimea. Ciocolata Leonidas ajunge in Romania la zece zile dupa ce a fost produsa, in timp ce in supermarket-uri exista si ciocolata cu cateva luni vechime.

BH: Care sunt produsele din ciocolata cel mai bine vandute?

Jolyon Salvatore M'Bei: Produsele cele mai cautate sunt pralinele, iar ca pret pralinele fara zahar, indulcite cu maltitol si cele cu lichior sunt cele mai scumpe. Dintre tipurile de ciocolata, cu siguranta ciocolata cu lapte este cea mai cautata in Romania, insa ciocolata neagra castiga teren, avand in vedere ca avem multi clienti care se informeaza si constientizeaza beneficiile ciocolatei negre. In plus Leonidas va lansa cateva produse noi anul acesta, printre care niste praline care se dizolva in lapte si din care se prepara ciocolata calda. Avem si inghetata si sticle de sampanie.

BH: Intentionati sa amenajati o terasa exterioara pentru clientii care vor sa petreaca mai mult timp in ciocolaterie, la o cafea cu ciocolata?

Jolyon Salvatore M'Bei: Deocamdata nu vom face acest lucru, dar in viitor luam varianta in considerare. Vara aceasta vom reorganiza spatiul interior si vor exista si cateva masute. De asemenea design-ul va reda noul stil Leonidas, stil care se regaseste deja in amenajarea celorlalte doua magazine din Bucuresti. Magazinul va fi inchis pana in septembrie pentru renovari. Am vrea din toamna sa aducem si patiserie belgiana in magazin.

Despre Leonidas:

Leonidas este o marca belgiana de ciocolata care a luat nastere la inceputul anilor 1910, cand cofetarul Leonidas Kestekides, medaliat cu bronz si aur la o importanta competitie internationala de dulciuri, s-a stabilit la Bruxelles si a deschis prima cofetarie. In cei aproape 100 de ani de existenta s-au creat peste 100 de tipuri de ciocolata Leonidas, vanduta in 1.400 de magazine in toata lumea. Printre ingredientele unice folosite se numara alune din Turcia, cirese Morello din Perigord, migdale din Italia si nuci de Grenoble.