

Something to Chew On

Despite the advertising world's claim of its "new and improved" status, chewing gum is not a modern, or even a recent, invention. It has delighted people around the world for thousands of years.

Humble Origins

Historians believe that as early as 50 A.D. the ancient Greeks chewed mastiche. This is a resin that comes from the Mastic tree (the word "masticate" means to chew). Researchers also found that the Mayans, an Indian civilization that dominated Central America during the second century, enjoyed chewing chicle. This is a natural gum that comes from the latex of the Sapodilla tree. It would later become the main ingredient in chewing gum.

The American Indians, too, chewed a natural form of gum-like resin. This one came from the bark of spruce trees. They introduced the custom of chewing spruce gum to the early North American settlers. Merchants in New England took advantage of this natural treat. They created the first commercial chewing gum by selling and trading lumps of spruce. Spruce gum was sold until the 1850s. At that time paraffin wax became the new popular base for chewing gum.

The Evolution

The modern age of chewing gum products began in 1869. The Mexican General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, is best remembered as the man who conquered the Alamo. However, he also hired a New York inventor named Thomas Adams to develop a new form of rubber using chicle. Adams was not successful in developing the rubber. However, he did produce a gum that could be chewed. He called it Adams New York No. 1.

Gum made with chicle and similar bases soon became more popular than either spruce or paraffin gum. Not only was it smoother and softer to chew, but it also held its flavor better than any previous type of chewing gum. By the 1900s chewing gum was manufactured in numerous shapes and sizes, as well as in different flavors, such as peppermint, fruit, and spearmint.

The Wrigley Connection

For many people, the name "Wrigley" is equivalent to gum, but this was not always the case. In 1891, William Wrigley Jr. came to Chicago from Philadelphia. He was 29 years old and had only \$32 in his pocket, but he had the ambition and the determination to start a business of his own. He also had great talent as a salesman, something he learned from his father, the manufacturer and salesman of Wrigley's Scouring Soap.

While working as a soap salesman in the Chicago area, he decided to offer premiums to the merchants he visited, as an extra incentive to buy his product. One of these premiums was baking powder. When that proved to be even more popular than the soap, he switched to the baking powder business. In 1892, he hit on the idea of offering two packages of chewing gum with each can of baking powder. Not only was the offer a big success, but once again the premium -- this time the chewing gum -- seemed more promising than the product it was supposed to promote. Wrigley decided that chewing gum was the product with the potential he had been looking for, and he began to market it under his own name.

Getting a foothold in the chewing gum business was not easy. The industry was still poorly developed at that time, but there were at least a dozen chewing gum companies established in the United States. They all offered products that were better known than any of Wrigley's brands. To make matters worse, in 1899 the six largest of those companies merged to form "the chewing gum trust." This meant some very serious competition for a struggling newcomer.

Still, Wrigley stuck with it. In the early days, he did most of the selling himself. He demonstrated a knack for knowing what the customer wanted. He also continued to use premiums to encourage merchants to stock his products. He knew that they would be more likely to carry the gum if they received a little "something for nothing." In addition, Wrigley was one of the first people to experiment with the use of advertising to promote the sale of a brand-name item. He correctly believed that if consumers came into a store already knowing about his gum, storekeepers would not only be willing, but would actually want, to have a larger stock on hand.

This idea was put to the test when Wrigley decided to concentrate on popularizing one of his gums. It was a slow-selling, spearmint-flavored variety, but he believed it was a superior product. In 1906 he chose to advertise this particular gum on a modest scale in three eastern cities, Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse. The results of his now-famous "Wrigley's Spearmint" were promising, to say the least.

An Expanding Universe

Many people had tried for years to develop a gum that could be blown into bubbles, but it did not happen until 1928. Walter Diemer was a cost analyst for the Fleer Company. He was a young man who knew nothing about chemistry, but he found the right combination of ingredients. The gum he created had both the necessary strength and elastic stretch when filled with air to give endless hours of popping pleasure.

An Eight-Step Process

Each type of gum has its own specific formula that makes it unique. While the exact combinations of ingredients are carefully guarded company secrets, the ingredients themselves are not. The most common chewing gum components are: powdered sugar, gum base (a combination of food-grade synthetic and natural ingredients that make the gum smooth and chewy), glucose syrup, softeners, flavoring and coloring. For the sugarless varieties, various sugar substitutes replace the powdered sugar and glucose syrup.

The gum is produced in an eight-step process:

1. The gum base ingredients are melted together and filtered.
2. Powdered sugar, glucose syrup, flavoring, and the other ingredients are slowly added to the base until the warm mix thickens like dough.
3. Machines known as extruders blend, smooth, and form the gum.
4. The gum is shaped in any of a number of ways: flattened and cut into sticks; squeezed into a rope shape and cut into chunks; or molded into shapes and candy coated.
5. The gum is then lightly sprinkled with powdered sweetener to keep it from sticking to machinery or packaging.
6. In a temperature-controlled room, the gum is cooled for up to 48 hours, which allows it to set properly.
7. If the gum is candy coated -- like most gumballs or pellet gum -- it is sprayed with liquid sweetener, allowed to dry and then sprayed again. The process is repeated several times until the candy shell reaches the proper thickness.
8. High-speed machines carefully wrap and package the gum in airtight wrappers to ensure that it is fresh and soft when you open the pack, and then it is shipped out to stores.

Today, there are more than 1,000 varieties of gum manufactured and sold in the United States. You can find varieties filled with liquid or speckled with crystals; kinds that won't stick or are made without sugar; in wild flavor combinations like mango and watermelon, or in crazy shapes like long rolls of tape. No matter what your preference, there is a gum that's made for you!