PEZ

AUSTRIAN INTRODUCED THE WORLD TO THE CANDY AND CONTAINERS – AND TOOK IT BY STORM

BY MARK LUCE

In 1927, an Austrian named Eduard Haas III created a candy/breath mint designed as a substitute for smoking. He called the mints PEZ after the first, middle and last letters of the German word for peppermint (pfeffferminz). They came in a tin, much like Altoids do today. In the 1940s, the company introduced the more familiar looking “hygienic dispensers” designed to look like cigarette lighters. However, in 1952, the company expanded beyond Europe and brought PEZ to America, complete with the cartoon-character head dispensers and a new, fruity taste that has carved out a unique spot on the American sweet-tooth for the past 50 years.

Since then, the company has created more than 500 different dispensers, covering characters from Bullwinkle and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles to Asterix and Zorro.

Of course, they aren’t all tied to cartoons or products, as PEZ has made series of Santas, bunches of bunnies, covers of witches, a space gun, a psychedelic eyeball in a hand (the ’60s, for sure, man) and even a plethora of dinosaurs called “Pez-a-saurs.” With nearly 3 billion of the candies consumed in 60 countries a year, the PEZ phenomenon shows no signs of slowing.

Giggle all you want, but the prices for some of the most rare containers will make your jaw drop. In the 1970s PEZ made a dispenser called “Make a Face” that contained 17 small parts so the children could create different faces on the dispenser. It shortly became clear that the removable face parts presented choking hazards, and the company quickly yanked the dispensers from the shelves. If you are lucky enough to have one, however, it’s worth anywhere from $4,000 to $5,000. A rare bride and groom set from the 1960s is worth upwards of $3,500.

There exist three PEZ collectors newsletters, several books and price guides. Countless numbers of local and regional clubs not only sponsor conventions all over the country, but also a PEZ cruise that launches this month. Yes, you too can join other PEZ Heads on a four-night trip from New York to Halifax, Nova Scotia and back. The trip is a compendium of everything PEZ, including scavenger hunts, bingo, trivia, and more wheeler and dealing for dispensers (among the true PEZ believers) than you could possibly imagine.

If you are a huge fan of the tablets themselves (made a plethora of unpronounceable ingredients that it’s probably better you don’t know exactly what they are), you will want to trek to the Burlingame Museum of Pez Memorabilia in Burlingame, Calif., (just south of San Francisco). For $3, you can see more than 500 PEZ dispensers and scads of related PEZ memorabilia. The museum claims to have one version of every PEZ dispenser ever made.

Last month, the PEZ company introduced a new flavor: PEZ Cola, which should be on the shelves in local stores now. To that, and all things related, we can only exclaim, “How PEZ-tacular!”

Mark Luce is a freelancer who lives in Lawrence, Kan., where he longs for a Bullwinkle Pez dispenser.