

Out of Bounds

SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

PEZ

Princess Leia and Batman, perched on high, look down on my desk. While they are surrounded by various geegaws, trinkets and talismans, the fair princess and Dark Knight stand out, not only because they are taller than the others, but because they sport slits in their throats that dispense rectangles of fruity pleasure.

Of course, we're talking about the inordinately dorky, but supremely endearing plastic dispensers of PEZ, which have delighted children for ages and have created some passionate adult devotees well.

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 (pfefferminz). 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

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

BY MARK LUCE

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, covens 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 conven-



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tions 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 wheeling 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.

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