

■ BY MOTHER MARTHA

“Baci” Perugia chocolates, a made-in-Italy icon, are celebrating their 100th birthday this year. *Baci* means “kisses,” and their birth and history are partly the product of a love story.

The Perugia confectionary company, still based in the central Italian city of Perugia in Umbria — not far from the city of St. Francis, Assisi — although owned since 1988 by the Swiss food giant Nestlé, is celebrating this milestone by launching a new chocolate called *Dolce Vita Baci*. Its recipe has a lemon-flavored center, coated by white chocolate with a hint of vanilla and topped with the ubiquitous whole hazelnut. Its tin-foil wrappings and outer packaging are also new, colorfully designed by the fashion designers Dolce & Gabbana. These will envelop the “100th Anniversary Celebration Collection” and, separately, the “Limited Edition” of the *Dolce Vita Baci*.

Baci’s creator was born **Luisa Sargentini** in Perugia on October 30, 1877. At age 20 she married **Annibale Spagnoli** and, with two friends, in 1907 bought out a grocery shop and renamed it “Perugina.”

Annibale started to make confetti and Luisa candies, chocolates and biscuits. Twenty years later, while Annibale was away serving in the First World War, Luisa expanded the business. By the 1918 armistice she had employed over 100 people.

In 1922, Luisa came up with a brilliant idea: to use chopped hazelnuts left over from her other sweets as the center of a new creamy chocolate filling topped with a whole toasted hazelnut and encased in dark chocolate. Because its irregular shape reminded Spagnoli of a clenched fist’s knuckles, she named her brainstorm *cazzotti*, “punches” in Italian. But to soften the name of the candy, Luisa decided to re-name the candies *Baci*, reasoning that customers would rather purchase a kiss than a punch.

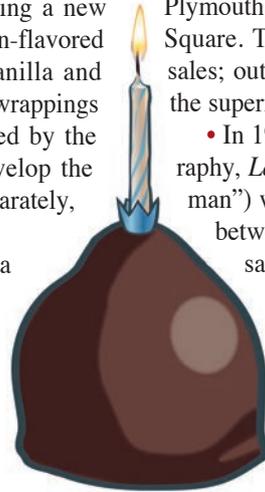
The Perugia art director **Federico Seneca**, inspired by Luisa’s idea of inserting love messages into her pre-War chocolates, decided to copy this idea for her bite-size *Baci*. He chose romantic texts by famous writers.

In 1923, Annibale left the business and Luisa. He had discovered that Luisa had fallen in love with **Giovanni Buitoni**, the son of their partner, Francesco, who was 14 years her junior.

In 1924, Seneca chose silver tinfoil with blue writing to wrap each chocolate individually and devised the blue and silver box depicting a couple (possibly Luisa and Giovanni), dressed in black and kissing under a shower of stars. **Francesco Hayez**’s painting, *The Kiss*, had undoubtedly inspired Seneca’s design.

The combination of the recipe, name, secret messages, and

HAPPY 100TH BIRTHDAY, “BACI”!



packaging, made *Baci* an instant commercial success.

In fact, a 1927 advertisement boasts: “In just five years, Perugia has sold over 100 million *Baci*.”

Other historical highlights:

- In 1939 Perugia opened its first store in the USA, on New York’s Fifth Avenue. Today its New York shops are located at 140 Plymouth Street in Brooklyn and at Eataly on Manhattan’s Union Square. These two outlets alone cover 20 percent of American sales; outside New York City, *Baci* are sold at Wal-Mart, and at the supermarket chains Kroger and ShopRite.

- In 1972 Longanesi published **Giovanni Buitoni**’s autobiography, *La Storia di un Imprenditore* (“The Story of a Businessman”) which describes the history of *Baci*, and the relationship between Giovanni and Luisa. The book contains a sad passage about Luisa’s premature death from throat cancer on September 21, 1935 at the age of 58. From her deathbed, Giovanni recounts, Luisa promised to help him find a new love before she died. A day after Luisa’s promise, Giovanni met a young opera singer, **Letizia Cairone**, and he married her a year later.

- From 1997-99, Alitalia painted its Boeing 747 “Portofino,” flying the Rome-New York route, in *Baci* wrappings.

- In 2003, during “Eurochocolate,” the world’s largest chocolate festival, held annually in Perugia, the biggest *Baci* ever was displayed: 2.15 meters tall (about 7 feet), 7.26 meters wide (about 25 feet), and weighing 5,980 kilos (more than 13,000 pounds); it was listed in the Guinness Book of World Records.

- Since 2011, Perugia has added white chocolate, milk chocolate, extra dark 70%, and one with a fruity center, to its permanent *Baci* repertoire, as well as a *Baci* spread in 2021.

- In addition to Italian, *Baci*’s inserted love messages are published in Spanish, French, English, Chinese and Portuguese. Since 2017 they’ve included 100 proverbs in dialects from nine Italian regions: Campania, Lombardy, Umbria, Puglia, Liguria, Latium, Veneto, Sicily, and Piedmont.

Today Perugia reports that 1,500 *Baci* are produced every minute in Perugia. They are exported to 55 countries, with half a billion sold each year. This year the **Perugina Chocolate House** is housing an exhibition about the history of *Baci* on Perugia’s Viale San Sisto 207/c (closed on Sundays). A tour includes a tasting or a chocolate-making lesson. Telephone 800-800-907 in Italy or 011-39-024-546-7655 from abroad, or write to casadelcioccolatoperugina@servizio-clienti.it. Reservations required. ○

Book cover of Buitoni’s autobiography, Alitalia’s *Baci* airplane, *Baci*, Dolce & Gabbana’s new wrappings, Luisa Spagnoli.

