

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 42 (2015)
Heft: 3

Artikel: Camille Bloch : investing in a 4th generation of chocolatiers
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907108>

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Camille Bloch: investing in a 4th generation of chocolatiers

Established in the valley of Saint-Imier in 1935, the factory that makes Ragusa is seeking to double its production capacity. The Bloch family is making a big investment in business development.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

Camille Bloch is set to invest CHF 30 million in its infrastructure at Courtelary. "The last major work here was carried out in the 1960s. We are investing for the future," says Jean Kernen, Operational Director. A third of the investment will be allocated to production. The remainder will be used, among other things, to build a visitors' centre for chocolate lovers. This facility, which will open in 2017, will explain all the steps in chocolate manufacture. Camille Bloch, whose factory is currently only open to visitors on weekday mornings, hopes to attract up to 100,000 visitors a year (compared to 8,000 at the moment, in addition to 30,000 visits to its shop).

The company is aiming – but without setting a date – to double its production capacity, which equates to making eight tonnes of filled chocolate a year. The management has indicated that development will focus on creating products based on the brand's flagship bars. Camille Bloch is targeting an increase in exports, in particular in Europe and Scandinavia. And Asia? "China, for example, is not on the agenda for the moment. The

culture of chocolate is not very well established there and we remain a company that makes speciality rather than mass-market products," explains company spokesperson Regula Gerber.

Jean Kernen points out that the family-run company has enjoyed strong growth for the past decade. It doubled its market share in Switzerland between 2003 and 2014, which now stands at 5.1 %. The flagship product, Ragusa, has followed the same upward trajectory. Currently, 1,900 tonnes of it are made a year out of a total production of 3,700 tonnes. Camille Bloch has invested heavily in the Swiss chocolate market, securing Migros as a customer in 2013. The orange-branded giant has been added to its traditional retailer, the Coop. The company, which generated a turnover of CHF 63 million in 2014, anticipates a similar figure in 2015 owing to the strong franc.

The chocolatier has developed its portfolio by embellishing its flagship products. The traditional Ragusa product has already been made available in a dark chocolate variety, and now also in a caramel one for the



Daniel Bloch, the grandson of the firm's founder Camille Bloch, is in charge of the company today

younger generation. It is produced in 25-gram and 11-gram formats, whereas the traditional bar weighs 50 grams. The brand has also created chocolate mousses. It is also well known for its pralines with kirsch, cognac and so on. There are 70 different specialities in total, some of which are seasonal, including kosher chocolate for Jewish Passover.

How does it intend to entice the younger generation? Camille Bloch has recruited a Community Manager, who focuses on the products' presence on social networks such as Instagram and Twitter. The brand has nevertheless reached a ceiling on the Swiss market. "Our distribution has almost reached its limits. We can therefore only grow through innovation and by launching new products," says Regula Gerber. The manufacturer is also operating in a country where chocolate consumption fell in 2014 for the first time in many years, dropping to slightly below 12 kilos per person. The management attributes this decline, among other things, to a downturn in tourism last year. In addition, the share of foreign chocolates consumed is growing, says Regula Gerber.

The model of the planned new facility in Courtelary



At the age of 51, Daniel Bloch, the grandson of the company's founder, Camille Bloch, has taken over the management of the company as CEO and Chairman of the Board of Directors, on which his brother Stéphane also sits. There is a fourth generation able to take over the reins. Is the commune of Courtelary in the Saint-Imier valley still the best location for Camille Bloch? Jean Kernen is convinced it is. "We have enough space here to expand but also sustainable framework conditions and lower salary levels than in Geneva or Zurich. There are also good train connections to Biel," adds Jean Kernen. Developing while remaining the same is Ragusa's philosophy. As CEO Daniel Bloch puts it, "This chocolate is like an old friend who is always there. You don't want it to change too much."

From Dubrovnik to Courtelary

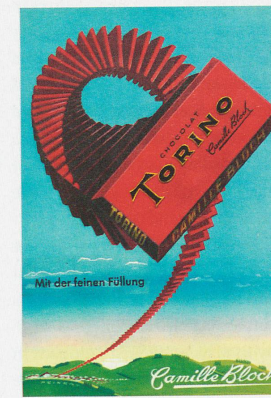
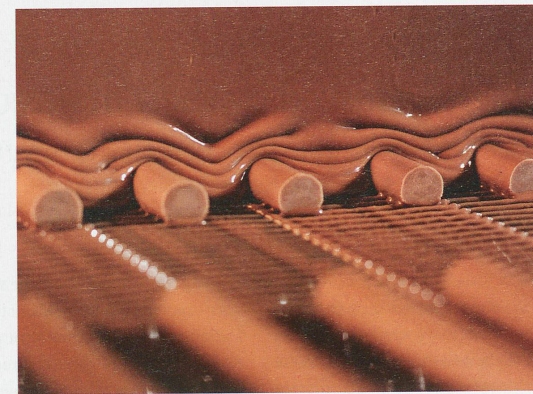
Like many Swiss people, Camille Bloch's background is very much European. The Blochs originally came from France. They arrived in Switzerland around 1850 and settled in Berne, where the Jews were permitted to reside, as the journalist Michel Bühler outlined in a book published to mark the brand's 75th anniversary. Camille was born (a French citizen) in 1891. He began his career as an apprentice at Chocolat Tobler in Berne. After being naturalised as a Swiss citizen and performing Swiss military service, he set up his own company in 1929. He relocated his plant to Courtelary in 1934, taking over a former paper mill.

The Second World War impacted upon the production of Camille's products. During the conflict, there was restricted access to cocoa for in-

dustrial. The amounts customers could buy were rationed and they required food coupons. The owner of the Bernese company decided to put hazelnuts, which were not subject to embargoes, in his chocolates, enabling the manufacture of a product with fewer cocoa beans. He also decided to fill his chocolate with hazelnut praline, which was an innovation requiring technical improvements to be able to cut a substance that was both hard and soft at the same time without deforming it. Finally, he created 50-gram bars when ration coupons permitted the purchase of 100 grams of confectionery and 100 grams of chocolate. But Ragusa was classified in both categories!

It was now just a question of finding a name. The solution came from Europe, Ragusa being the former name of the Croatian city of Dubrovnik which Camille had visited. Then came Torino in 1948 as the name for his almond-filled chocolate.

With Jewish origins, the Bloch family assumed positions of responsibility over the course of Swiss history. It appears that Nathan, Camille's grandfather, was one of the first leaders of the Jewish community in Berne. Rolf, the father of the current directors of the company, became president of the solidarity fund committee, which was set up after the unclaimed assets affair for Holocaust victims in need. In the depths of the war, people questioned whether it would be good for business for Dr Bloch to use his family name on his chocolates. He also received offers to buy his company – at a good price... Today, Ragusa is sold in some 30 countries and is part of Swiss heritage.



What's important is the blend of Turkish hazelnuts and cocoa beans from Ghana

The production of Camille Bloch chocolates in Courtelary in the Bernese Jura begins in a modest warehouse. The product's key ingredient is found in bags one and a half times taller than a person, filled with a tonne of cocoa beans. These mainly come from central Ghana via the port of Amsterdam. Next to these big bags are stacked palettes full of Turkish hazelnuts – a delicate commodity, as the blossoming hazel trees in Trabzon suffered a frost in spring 2014, doubling the price of the year's harvest. A little further on, boxes of almonds imported from California are piled up on top of one another. These are the raw materials of Camille Bloch in the same plant where production began in the Saint-Imier valley 86 years ago.

In the first production hall, German-made machinery, some of it not so new but still gleaming, turns incessantly. This is where the roasting and grinding of the beans, hazelnuts and almonds takes place. It gives off a sweet, roasted aroma. The view from the large windows looks out over meadows. The fields extend to the edge of the forest running along the Saint-Imier valley and there is a real sense of isolation even though we are just 20 minutes away from Biel by train.

The raw materials used to make Ragusa and Torino chocolate bars are then transported by pipeline towards the plant's main building. Here, the moisture is removed from the cocoa and it falls as powder into the bottom of large heating tanks. It is now

transformed into a paste. After passing through the "kitchens" on the floor above, the mass re-emerges with cocoa butter and powdered milk added to the mix. Enormous mixers – known as "conches" – knead the paste to turn it into almond or hazelnut praline. "The fillings are our speciality," explains company spokesperson Regula Gerber.

The heat on this floor is tropical and you cannot hear yourself speak for the noise. Torino bars, thousands of bars filled with almonds and hazelnuts, advance along the production line 20 abreast. Passing through chocolate rollers, the bottom of the pralines is covered with chocolate, before they receive an overall topping. The line then goes

through a cold section to solidify the bars before they are cut and boxed by Camille Bloch employees. Their heads covered in paper hats, there are around a hundred staff – operators, food product specialists, engineers, electricians and assistants – working for the Bloch family on production and machine maintenance. According to the management, the automation of processes will see the number of workers focussing on repetitive tasks fall in the future. The work will shift towards more complex procedures because, chocolate or not, Camille Bloch is still an industrial concern.

STÉPHANE HERZOG IS AN EDITOR WITH THE "SWISS REVIEW"