

BY JOE SANO

CHOCOLATES, RABBITS AND FASHION

The Luisa Spagnoli Story



You may have never heard of her. Yet she was one of Italy's leading entrepreneurs of the 20th century. Her name - Luisa Spagnoli. She is known as the Queen of Chocolate, but her story involves both candy, rabbits and fashion.

It started at a candy factory owned by her husband, Annibale, along with Francesco Buitoni, Lene Ascoli, and Francesco Andreani. The little company, Perugina, decided to start a new product line, pastel-colored candy-coated almonds called "confetti." A little pouch or box of "confetti" became a staple at Italian weddings as a parting gift for the attendees.

As she strolled through the workplace, she was shocked by the scraps of almonds and hazelnuts littering the worktables. She thought, "How wasteful!" She

gathered up the nut scraps, mixed them with chocolate in a cylinder and called it cazzotti or punches. Not a very loving name for a candy and the size and shape was a bit odd as well. So, in 1922 Luisa experimented with an idea. She cut off smaller pieces from the chocolate tube and wrapped them in foil. She preferred the taste of hazelnuts, and this led to Baci kisses being born.

Milton Hershey introduced milk chocolate Hershey kisses in 1907 and while a large success in the USA, it was not well known in Italy. The Baci



kiss looked similar to the Hershey kiss but with a couple of twists. Spagnoli's creation mixed the melted dark chocolate with hazelnut scraps to create a creamy hazelnut praline filling with a whole roasted hazelnut on top. She finished it in a blue and white foil wrapper, but it was not quite done. Legend has it that the little printed love notes inside the Baci candy began when Luisa added handwritten love notes to the candy that she gave to her husband's partner Buitoni (yes, he is the pasta man). No judgement - just the legend.

These notes/scrolls remain part of the little candy's mystique. Over 1.5 million Baci are produced daily. It is interesting that the Perugina company touts the health benefits of the Baci - lowers cholesterol and blood pressure and yields good fats and proteins. Seeking an expanding market the company decided to introduce a green pistachio version of the Baci. It failed miserably and was yanked off the market. One company tour highlight is the "Baci One" a Guinness record holding Baci weighing in at over 13,500 pounds. Rossana, a hard candy by Perugina which is a staple for any Italian's candy dish, is another product she helped create. Nestle's Ltd now owns the Perugina brand and production is centered in San Sisto, Italy.



Luisa, however, was not content to be just in the candy business. She loved fashion and, as we have already seen, innovation. She helped develop a process for extracting the angora fur from rabbits without harming them. Her angora products rivaled the cashmere products that were the craze in the 1920s. This more ethical treatment of animals was years ahead of its time. The fur was woven into articles of clothing that she designed. Her fashion house employed both men and women and offered childcare, overtime and a modest retirement option to its workers. The Spagnoli angora yarn became world famous as well as the special patented comb used to extract the hair. She again was ahead of her time. Luisa died prematurely in 1937, and her son Mario took over the fashion house. As the

Second World War ended, he expanded the brand from knitwear to a line of affordable high fashion. Boutiques were established in all the major Italian cities. Lino Spagnoli took over the leadership of the brand in 1960. Such notable women of that era, Sophia Loren, Zsa Zsa Gabor and Ester Williams, championed the label. Upon Lino's passing in 1986, his children Nicoletta and Mario took over. Nicoletta, Luisa's great granddaughter, now runs the company and remains focused on growing the brand to over 200 stores while incorporating modern design and youthful styles that are affordable and also turning a family brand into an internationally recognized fashion label. English royalty has often embraced the LS brand. The clothes remain designed and manufactured in the Umbria region of Italy. □

