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# A Seaside Tradition

*A longtime beach-town favorite, saltwater taffy has a history that's nearly as varied as its flavors.*

TEXT BY ANDREW F. SMITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY DITTE ISAGER

WALK ALONG ANY boardwalk on the East Coast and nearly as recognizable as the scent of the sea is the sight of saltwater taffy in all its playful colors, flavors, and shapes. Yet despite its accidental origins, this chewy confection—a spin-off of classic taffy—has had lasting appeal.

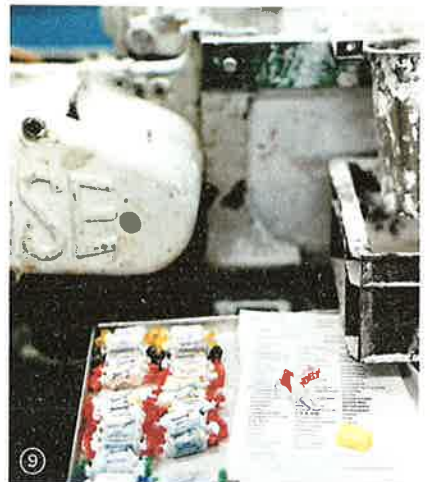
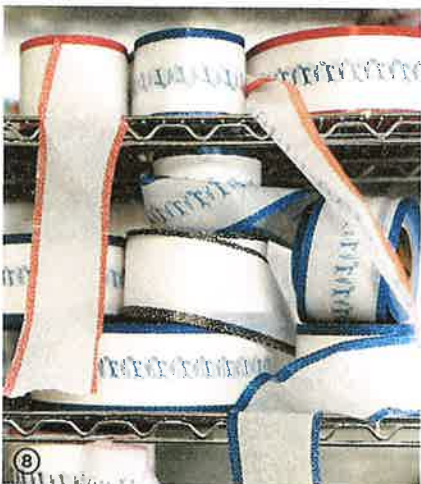
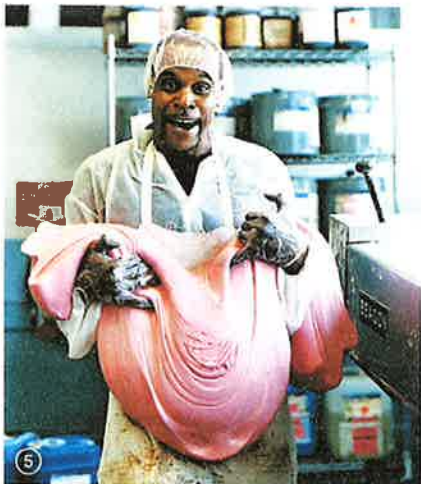
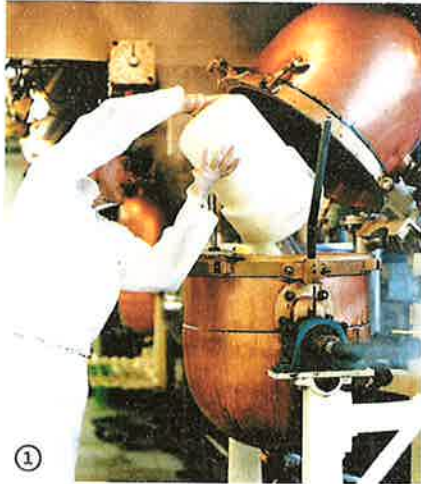
Taffy dates back more than 1,000 years, evidenced by a 10th-century Baghdad cookbook. As sugar became more widely available, a taffy similar to today's began to evolve and spread through medieval Europe.

The sweet didn't arrive in England until the early 19th century. Like the modern version, it was made from boiled sugar, corn syrup, or molasses, enriched with butter or cream, and flavored with vanilla, cocoa, or peppermint or lemon oil. Removed from the fire when it reached the hard-ball stage, the candy was cooled slightly before being pulled, stretched, and folded by hand until it turned pliable and took on a satiny sheen. The resulting confection was cut into short lengths, wrapped in paper, sealed with a twist at each end, and sold as a children's treat. Adults, however, were not without their indulgences. At popular parties known as taffy pulls, guests would pair off, stretching strands of candy with buttered hands before reaping the rewards of their labor.



By the 1840s, traditional taffy and taffy making had migrated to the United States. It quickly became a fad in several East Coast cities and eventually made its way to Atlantic City, New Jersey, which had emerged as an oceanside health resort. The town's salubrious reputation actually bolstered taffy sales. Physicians commonly prescribed sea air as a panacea for all manner of ills, and thousands of hopeful visitors flocked there each year for

**CLASSIC CONFECTION** Perhaps no other candy conjures memories of the beach like irresistibly sweet, unapologetically chewy saltwater taffy, in all its guises.



**HOW IT'S DONE** ① Saltwater taffy begins with butter and sugar heated to 250 degrees, as shown in the copper cauldrons at James' Candy Company, in Atlantic City. ② The molten mixture is poured into tubs and cooled overnight in a climate-controlled room.

③ A cooling table ensures the taffy drops to the proper temperature. ④ A pulling machine swirls in color and flavor as it stretches and aerates the mixture, resulting in the taffy's characteristic elasticity. ⑤ A typical batch of more than 100 pounds.

⑥ The taffy is fed through a batch roller, resulting in a slender profile. ⑦ The roll is cut to size. ⑧ Samples from the colorful array of wrappers. ⑨ Some 500 pieces of taffy are produced each minute at James', more than half a million each day.

their cure. Before long, hotel owners were complaining about beach sand being trekked onto their rugs. The city built a raised wooden walkway from the beach into town, connecting it to nearby inns. Vendors promptly set up stores and carts along the boardwalk, hawking knickknacks, ice cream, and candy such as taffy.

Saltwater taffy, however, still did not exist. One night, as the story goes, the tide rose higher than usual, flooding a boardwalk taffy and postcard shop and covering the inventory in foam. After brushing off the salty residue, the merchant found that the taffy tasted perfectly fine. In a stroke of marketing savvy, he dubbed his product saltwater taffy in the hopes of lending it a little seaside cachet. The ploy worked. The taffy, which differed from traditional taffy in name alone, sold well and even won a prize at the Pennsylvania State Fair in 1885.

More than one person has claimed to be the originator. But, it was Joseph Fralinger, an experienced candy maker, who perfected the formula and expanded his line to include an array of now-iconic pastel colors. Customers clamored for Fralinger's candies, and he opened shops in nearby Cape May and Ocean City, charging a penny a piece and a nickel for a sack of six.

Other candy makers besides Fralinger (who earned the title "taffy king") embraced saltwater taffy and invented new flavors, fillings, and refinements such as swirls and stripes. The term was later appropriated by taffy makers in coastal towns from Massachusetts to Florida and as far west as Salt Lake City. By the 1920s, saltwater taffy—despite being a misnomer—had become



a big business, with more than 450 companies manufacturing it.

Saltwater taffy's appeal endures. What was once only a summer industry is now a year-round operation with brisk mail-order sales. Many of the companies have consolidated, leaving a handful of producers, most of whom mechanized their operations as early as the 1930s. Yet tourists on the boardwalk today still can't help but stop and watch, transfixed, as the candy in its many shades is methodically pulled, stretched, and wound into glossy pastel ribbons that evoke the salty surroundings, even though the flavor doesn't quite reflect it.

**OPTIONS APLENTY** Chocolate has always been the best-selling flavor at James' Candy Company; runners-up include banana, strawberry, and vanilla. These timeless flavors along with newfangled ones, such as watermelon and mocha, are sold by the piece as well as by the pound.

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