Ghirardelli's Heritage - 160 Years

In 1849, when Domingo Ghirardelli immigrates to the United States, he has dreams of striking it rich in the California Gold Rush. After trying his hand and failing at mining, he settles on opening a tent-store in nearby Stockton, CA, selling various supplies and confections to fellow miners. With his new business proving successful, Domingo decides to open a store and hotel in San Francisco. After a major fire in 1851 destroys his businesses, he begins to rebuild. In 1852, he forms a new confectionery company that is to become the Ghirardelli Chocolate Company.

Today, Ghirardelli Chocolate Company has built on its signature taste and time-honored manufacturing processes to become America's premium chocolate company.

Read on for more of our rich heritage.

1817: Domenico Ghirardelli is born in Rapallo, Italy (near Genoa) to an exotic foods importer and his young wife. At a young age, Domenico is introduced to the chocolate and confectionery trade as he apprenticed for a local candy maker.

1837: At the age of 20, Ghirardelli marries first wife, and sets sail to Uruguay to partake in the South American chocolate trade. Here, he takes a job in a "coffee and chocolate establishment."

1838: A year later, attracted by opportunities in Lima, Ghirardelli sails around Cape Horn to Peru. Fatefully, Ghirardelli opens a confectionery store next to a cabinet shop owned by an American, James Lick.

1847: Enticed by the stories prosperity in North America, Lick leaves for San Francisco, taking 600 pounds of neighbor Ghirardelli's Chocolate with him. Meanwhile, Ghirardelli continues to operate his store in Peru, soon replacing his Italian name with its Spanish equivalent, Domingo.

1849: Following the death of his first wife and his remarriage to Carmen Alvarado, Ghirardelli learns of the gold strike at Sutter's Mill and sails unaccompanied to California. After prospecting in the Jamestown-Sonora area, Ghirardelli once again becomes a merchant, opening a general store in Stockton, California, offering supplies and confections to fellow miners. Located in a tent, it's one of the first shops in the area. Several months later, Ghirardelli opens a second store on the corner of Broadway and Battery in San Francisco, which becomes his first establishment in the city.

1851: On May 3, the fifth of a series of great San Francisco fires destroy some 1,500 buildings, including Ghirardelli's Battery Street location. Three days later a runaway fire levels half of Stockton. In the span of a few days, Ghirardelli's businesses are burned out of existence. He quickly consolidates his salvaged assets and opens the Cairo Coffee House on San Francisco's Commercial Street in September of the same year.

1852: After the Cairo Coffee House proves unsuccessful, Ghirardelli stays in San Francisco and forms a new confectionery company called Ghirardely & Girard on the corner of Kearny and Washington streets. This is the establishment of what is to become the modern day Ghirardelli Chocolate Company and over 150 years of traditional chocolate manufacturing. Business flourishes, and Ghirardelli soon sends for his family in Peru. He changes the company name to Mrs. Ghirardelli & Co, but is still undoubtedly run by Domingo. Records show the company imported 200 pounds of cocoa beans during the year.

1853: In September, the Ghirardelli family relocates the company again within the city, to the corner of Jackson and Mason streets.

1855: As the business continues to grow, the "manufactory" is once again moved to a larger facility on the corner of Greenwich and Powell streets, and houses the family living quarters as well. The office, however, stayed at 138 Jackson Street.

1865: Around this time, someone in the Ghirardelli Company makes an important observation—by hanging a bag of chocolate in a warm room, the cocoa butter drips out, leaving a residue that can be processed into ground chocolate. This technique, called the Broma process, is now generally used in the manufacture of chocolate.

1866: Imports of cocoa beans by the Ghirardelli Company climb to 1,000 pounds during the year.

1884: Three of four of Ghirardelli's sons become partners in the business, which now has 30 employees and ships products all over the West, to the eastern United States, China, Japan, and Mexico. The company drops its line of wines, cordials, and liquors, and sells only chocolate, coffee, and spices.

1885: Cocoa bean imports by the company jump to 450,000 pounds.

1892: Domingo Ghirardelli retires as head of the company, turning the management over to his three sons.

1893: Needing additional space, the company purchases the Pioneer Woolen Mill building, and manufacturing moves to that location, on San Francisco's northern waterfront. This is the present location of Ghirardelli Square.

1894: On a trip to his home in Rapallo, Italy, Domingo Ghirardelli dies at the age of 77 on January 17.

1900: The company sells its coffee and spice business, limiting its products to chocolate and mustard. A two-story warehouse (now called the Cocoa Building) is built on North Point Street.

1906: The great San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906 does not damage the company's North Point street plant, and manufacturing operations resume within 10 days of the disaster.

1915: To meet the energy needs of the emerging manufacturing complex, the Power House is built. Two buildings complete the handsome, block-square collection of plants and offices. The Apartment Building provides housing for a number of employees. The Clock Tower, beautifully designed in the style of Chateau Blois in France, stands prominently at the corner of North Point and Larkin Street.

1923: The company adds two floors to the Cocoa Building and the four-story structure becomes the base for 15-feet high, illuminated letters spelling "Ghirardelli." Visible for miles, the sign becomes a welcoming sight to ships passing through the Golden Gate.

1962: Two prominent San Franciscans, William Matson Roth and his mother, Mrs. William P. Roth, acquire the buildings and commission the architectural firm of Wurster, Bernardi & Emmons to design a modern specialty shopping center, retaining the exceptional Victorian qualities of the complex. Only one building, a wood-frame box factory, must be removed. It is replaced with a new structure called the Wurster Building, named for the principal architect. All of the other structures—the Chocolate Building, the Mustard Building, the Cocoa Building, the Apartment, the Power Plant, and the stately Clock Tower—are saved and renovated.

1963: The Golden Grain Macaroni Company, which is owned and operated by the De Domenico family, purchases the Ghirardelli Chocolate Company. The purchase includes the company name, product, formulas, and equipment.

1964: Ghirardelli Square undergoes a renovation and officially opened as a festival marketplace on November 29, 1964. The renovation included shoring up old buildings during construction of the underground garage and strengthening the buildings structurally.

1965: San Francisco declares Ghirardelli Square an official city landmark.

1967: Production facilities move to San Leandro, California.

1968: Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company and Real Property West, companies with established ties to San Francisco, become the new owners of Ghirardelli Square, pledging to maintain the flavor and integrity of Ghirardelli.

1982: The owners apply for and are granted National Historic Register status for Ghirardelli Square. The management at Ghirardelli Square seeks to enhance and improve the ambience of the Square by adding more greenery, trees, and flowers to the landscaping. New outdoor umbrellas enliven the interior of the Square, contributing to the visual appeal and atmosphere. With more than 75 tenants offering cuisine, art, and merchandise from around the world, Ghirardelli Square becomes a model for the restoration of classic buildings throughout the country.

1986: The Quaker Oats Company acquires Golden Grain and Ghirardelli Chocolate.

1992: Quaker Oats sells the Ghirardelli Chocolate division to a private investment group headed by John J. Anton and the Thomas H. Lee Company. John J. Anton becomes the President and CEO of the Ghirardelli Chocolate Company.

1998: Lindt and Sprungli Chocolate out of Switzerland acquires Ghirardelli Chocolate Company as a wholly owned subsidiary of its holding company. The largest plant expansion ever begins for Ghirardelli Chocolate. Expansion includes 50,000 square feet of new production and 20,000 square feet of laboratory and office space.

1999: Ghirardelli Chocolate Company launches it now famous filled Squares™ chocolates, including the ever-popular flavor — Milk Chocolate with Caramel Filling.

2002: Ghirardelli Chocolate Company celebrates its 150th Anniversary.

2003: Ghirardelli opens its first Factory Store at the site of the headquarters and manufactory in San Leandro, California.

2004: Ghirardelli Chocolate Company launches its first national television advertising campaign.

Ghirardelli Chocolate Company launches its first limited edition flavors, inspired by the holiday seasons' most popular flavors: Peppermint Bar, and Eggnog.

2005: Ghirardelli Chocolate Company re-launches its Dark Squares™ chocolate with new and improved recipe and becomes the first widely available chocolate to declare cacao content on its packaging.

Ghirardelli Chocolate Company launches its first national print advertising campaign for its baking chocolate.

Ghirardelli Ice Cream and Chocolate Shops launch a new Dark Chocolate version of their world famous hot fudge sauce.

2006: Ghirardelli introduces new Intense Dark Bars with luxuriously deep and velvety chocolate fused with sophisticated ingredients.