



A for Awesome

The Joy of Chocolate Letters

by Heather Tucker

It is that time of year again. The time of year when you head into a shop, spot the chocolate letter display and search for a chocolate letter that matches the first letter of your name. Infuriated that your letter is no longer available, you begin the process of coming up with a “letter alternative” – such as your favourite letter in the alphabet, “A” for “Awesome” or just any other qualifier that would allow you to purchase one of these Sinterklaas treats.

According to the history books, the custom of edible letters goes back to Germanic times when new-born children were given a runic letter made of bread as a symbol of good fortune. Bread letters were also used in convent schools during the Middle Ages to teach the alphabet. Once a letter was mastered, the children were allowed to gobble it up. However, it wasn't until the 19th century that letters became associated with Sinterklaas. Not in the traditional chocolate variety that we love today but as a gift-tag alternative. St Nicholas presents were covered with a sheet and a bread letter was placed on top to show where each child's gifts were located.

The production of chocolate letters began around 1900 but weren't readily available until the 1950s. Luckily now we can enjoy them and all their varieties with pleasure. Chocolate letters come in a variety of sizes and flavours. Milk chocolate, white chocolate, dark chocolate and chocolate with hazelnuts are the most popular, however others can be found. The letters also vary in decoration style, from a plain letter to letters covered in piped chocolate, nuts, fruit and even Zwarte Pieten decorations.

The chocolate letters are available in the Netherlands from around October 1st until December 5th. Traditionally, once December 5th has passed any remaining letters (which are usually not many) are returned to the factory. However, it is now possible to find some of the stores selling the left-over's and broken letters at a discount.

Each year there is always a discussion about which chocolate letters have the most chocolate in them. The idea being that a letter that is traditionally larger than another letter (for example an "m" versus a "c") must contain more chocolate. The chocolate letter companies have stated that all letters are created equal and contain the same amount of chocolate. However, old habits die hard meaning that come the middle of the chocolate letter season, you'll be hard pushed to find the "larger" letters.

So, how many chocolate letters have you devoured already this season?

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