

DEVRA FIRST

The Sky Bar's triumphant return

How an iconic candy was almost lost and then, unexpectedly, saved

By **Devra First** Globe Staff, Updated November 13, 2019, 6:00 a.m.



Sky Bars are being made again locally, thanks to Louise Mawhinney who bought new equipment and the Sky Bar name from Necco when it closed. They're made at a new storefront location on Boston Post Road in Sudbury. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

SUDBURY — All of this might have been lost.

The futuristic red logo, shooting across the bright yellow background. The impeccable aesthetics, a bar of chocolate divided into four sections, each sloping downward toward the next, etched in a fanlike pattern. The you-can-have-it-all gratification of one candy with a quartet of fillings: caramel, vanilla, peanut, fudge.

New England Confectionery Co.'s Sky Bar: born 1938, defunct 2018, the year Necco closed, putting all of its brands up for auction.

Most went to experienced operators. Sweethearts Candies and Necco Wafers were purchased by the century-old Spangler Candy Company, perhaps best known for its tangerine-colored, mysteriously banana-flavored Circus Peanuts. Boyer Candy Company (Mallo Cups), started during the Great Depression, snapped up Clark Bars. But Sky Bar? Sky Bar became the property of Louise Mawhinney, a former biotech executive originally from Scotland who runs an eclectic gourmet gift shop called Duck Soup in Sudbury, Mass. She had never made candy before, but a customer told her about the auction and she just couldn't let Sky Bar disappear.



Louise Mawhinney and her son, Frank Mawhinney, make Sky Bars at their storefront location on Boston Post Road in Sudbury. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF/THE BOSTON GLOBE

Now it is time for the big announcement: Sky Bar is officially back. “We are in production,” Mawhinney says. The candy bar is available at Duck Soup and online; Sky Bar

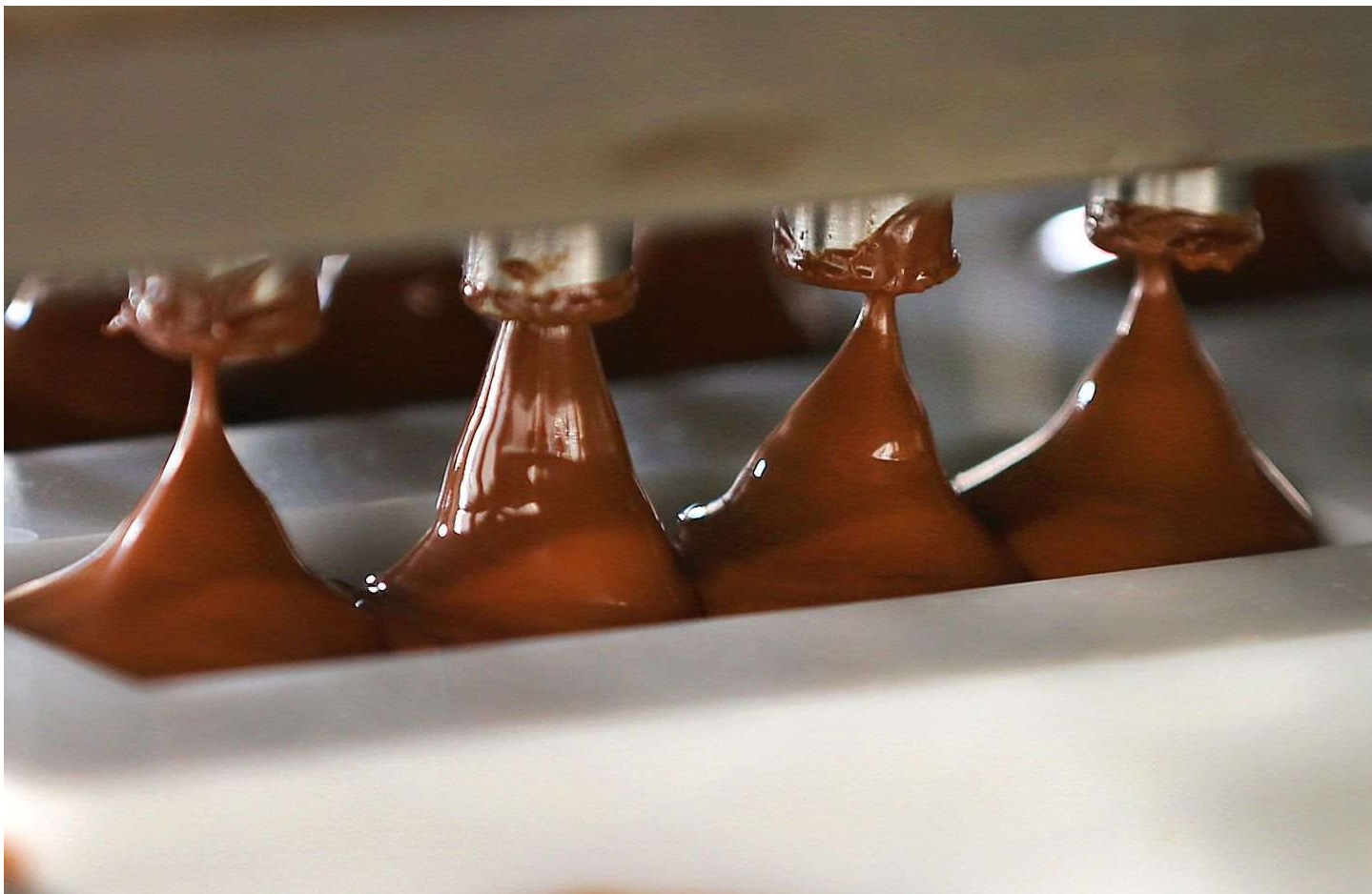
Confectionary Co.'s Sudbury headquarters will have its grand opening Dec. 7. After the holidays, Mawhinney plans to get a wholesale license and ramp up the operation. "I've got distributors in the Midwest waiting for it. The last thing I want is to disappoint people by not being able to make demands. There are more than 700 people [signed up for updates] on my e-mail list, and they are calling every day."

In the world of candy, Sky Bar's return is a big deal. Even if you're not a candy geek, you can admire it conceptually. Segmented candy bars with different fillings are rarities. Minnesota's Trudeau Candy Company once made something called the Seven Up bar — with an ambitious seven fillings — but discontinued it in 1979. Cadbury's limited-edition Spectacular 7, introduced in 2015, was very limited indeed. Just 50 were made, and the only way to get one was to win it on Twitter.

I need to see the new Sky Bar with my own eyes. After all, it rose from the dead, a chocolate miracle, filled with ... what, exactly, this time around? Did we learn *no* lessons from "Pet Sematary"? So on a recent morning, I pull up to Sky Bar HQ. I can see the logo from the street, blazing its way across the building's gray front. It's heraldic, thrilling. The space is adjacent to Duck Soup in the Mill Village shopping plaza. The two are connected; the lease for the Sky Bar spot became available just when Mawhinney needed it. And Mill Village was already zoned for manufacturing. "Everything was so spookily in our favor," she says.

The moment I enter, things begin to feel festive: The gray floor is sprinkled in splotches of red, yellow, and blue. No grim factory this. The vibe is more Willy Wonka goes to preschool: There's a mural of kids holding balloons on the wall, retro candy and Sky Bar sweat shirts on display, and Mawhinney in a white lab coat and hairnet, gesturing onward in anticipation.

When Necco made the Sky Bar, the company used vast machines, toward the end only running them to produce the confection a few times a year. They would never have fit in the Sudbury space, with 900 square feet devoted to manufacturing and another 1,000 to retail. Plus they were old, and they looked it. Mawhinney wanted something shiny and exciting that passersby could watch through the windows. How to make this all work?

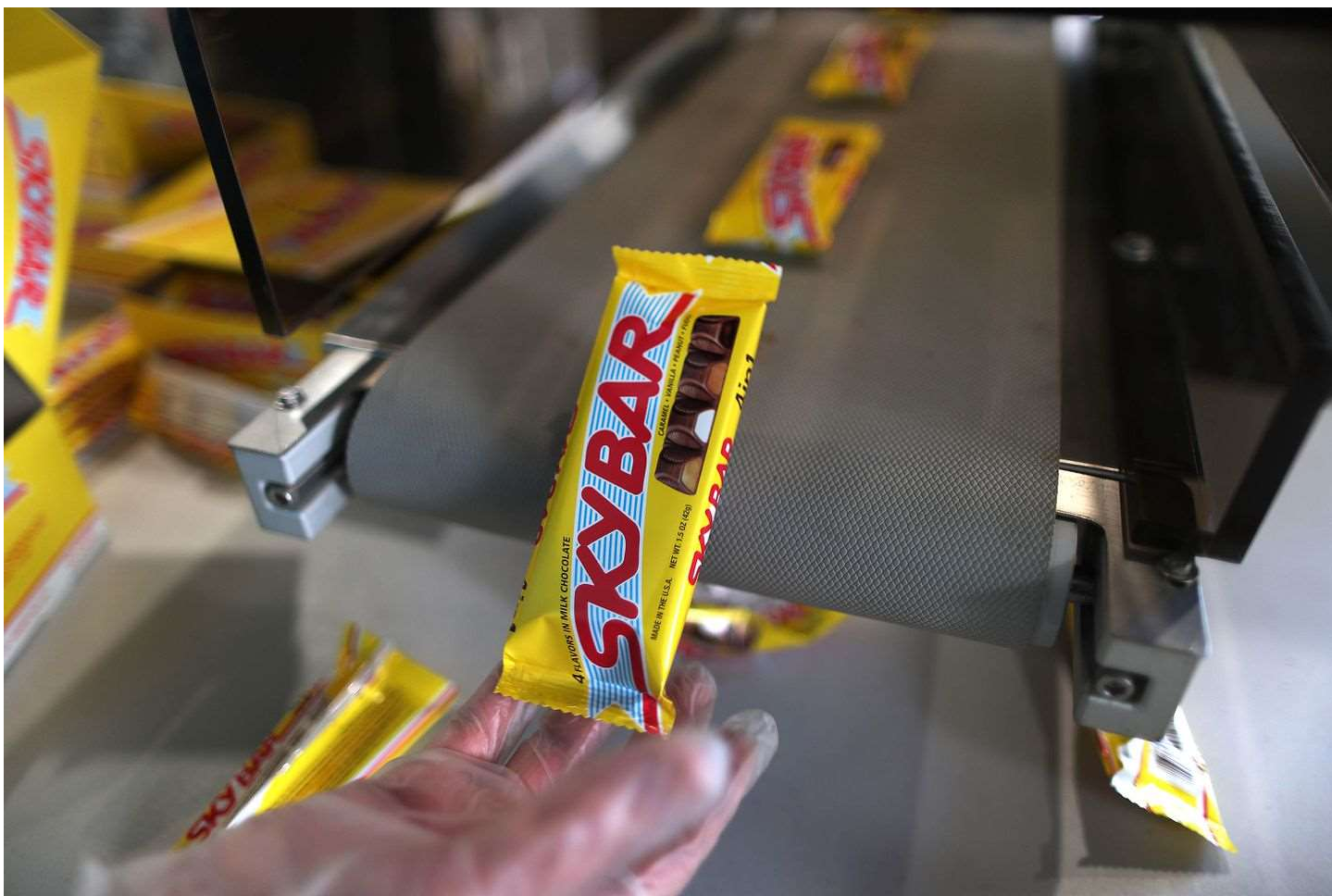


With her bid, Mawhinney won all of the historic formulas of Sky Bars. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF/THE BOSTON GLOBE

There's maybe one guy who could figure it out: Jeff Green, formerly vice president of research and development at Necco, who worked there for more than 30 years. (He's now the R&D director for Log House Foods, where he's currently working on malted milk balls.) He's talked to most of the auction winners, visiting many of their facilities, and he has been working closely with the Sky Bar crew — which also includes Mawhinney's son Frank, who is Duck Soup's store manager, and Duck Soup baker Dan DiPace.

With Green's help, they started to figure it out. Michigan company Egan Food Technologies custom-built them a molding line. A truck delivered an Ilapak Carrera 500 wrapping line. "It's probably a tenth the size" of the former equipment, Green says. "It's the difference between a small startup operation and an old established brand."

If they were scrappier, they also wanted to be more delicious. Sky Bar's recipe had changed many times over eight decades. With her bid, Mawhinney won all of the historic formulas.



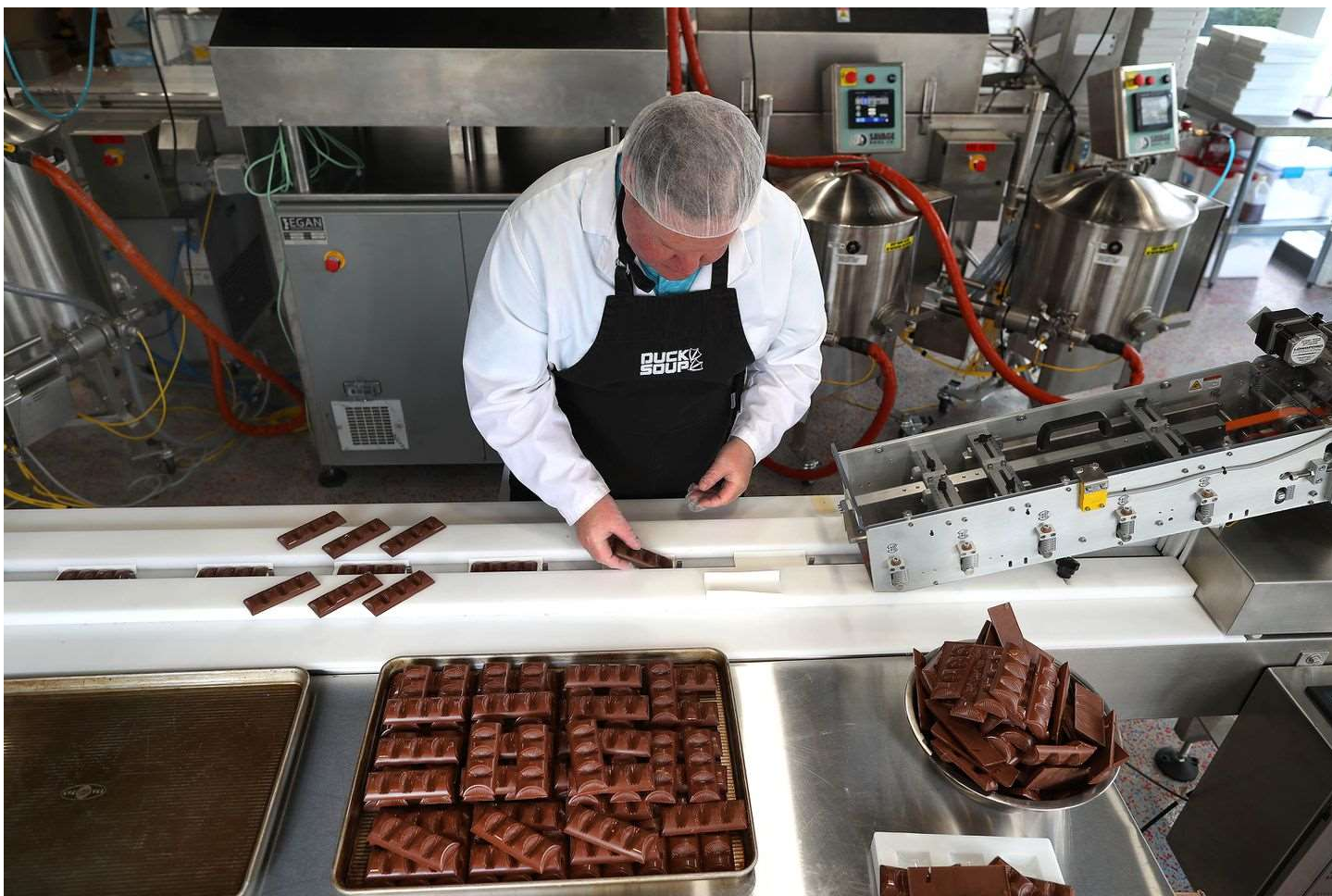
The candy's price tag is reasonable: \$1.98 per bar. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF/THE BOSTON GLOBE

Green knew many of them well: "I had a finger in all of them at some point," he says. They slowly worked their way through, with the high school students who staff Duck Soup pitching in on taste-tests. The winner: a recipe from the 1970s. In other words, if you are in your 50s or thereabout, the next Sky Bar you eat may remind you poignantly of your childhood, a lost taste recovered.

Some things had to change, of course. They had to make the recipe compatible with the new process. And they needed to source new ingredients. Their chocolate comes from Callebaut. As for the fillings, they are all made in house. For the peanut, they decided to use Teddie Peanut Butter, made in Everett.

"A lot of people from Necco, key people like the plant engineer, they went to Teddie," Louise says. "Why not support the former Necco people?"

"Especially because Teddie Peanut Butter is so good," adds Frank.



Re-creating the Sky Bar is an investment. Mawhinney says she can't disclose the price she paid at auction, but "it wasn't a ridiculously low number." The equipment was expensive. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF/THE BOSTON GLOBE

And the vanilla filling is made with Fluff, produced in Lynn. When Necco closed, those who follow candy mourned this latest blow to the region's confectionery scene. But Sky Bar, the only Necco product still made in Massachusetts, is now more of a local product than ever.

Re-creating it is an investment. Mawhinney says she can't disclose the price she paid at auction, but "it wasn't a ridiculously low number." The equipment was expensive. But the candy's price tag is reasonable: \$1.98 per bar. "We want Sky Bar fans to be able to afford it," she says.

Susan Benjamin is among those eager to see Sky Bar return. Author of the book "Sweet as Sin: The Unwrapped Story of How Candy Became America's Favorite Pleasure" and founder of the shop True Treats Historic Candy, Benjamin grew up in Worcester and as a

college student used to score free Sky Bars and Necco Wafers out of the back door of the Cambridge factory.



An old Necco crate. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF/THE BOSTON GLOBE

She believes there's still a market for this product. "There's definitely a following for the Sky Bar. No question. People have asked me about it in the shop," she says. But the fan base is aging, and Sky Bar will have to win over a new generation. (Someone suggested making a CBD-infused version called the Sky High Bar, but Mawhinney nixed the idea.)

"The issue also outside of demographics really is distribution. Can they make enough? ... That's what scares me, because candy production is hard and distribution is hard." So much can go wrong, and there's always troubleshooting involved. "I so hope that they can do it. I really want them to pull it off," Benjamin says.

Although the machines are small, they are mighty: They turn out more than 2,000 bars in 90 minutes. But Mawhinney acknowledges the challenges of candy-making. "I discovered

it's an art and a science," she says. "I thought it was just a science, but *no*. There are so many nuances to it."

They're still perfecting production, and broken bars are part of the process. (They won't go to waste, at least. A local hotel plans to use them on its dessert menu.) If fillings aren't perfectly centered, they will bleed through the coating. If any filling leaks onto the plastic mold, it has to be hand-washed, laborious and time-consuming. "Getting the right proportions is very hard," says Frank Mawhinney. "You're talking about 10ths or 100ths of an ounce, millimeters one way or the other, that would determine whether or not your test batch is usable or a complete failure."

Melted chocolate dollops from the machine into the molds, one after the other, and I can wait no longer. It's time to try the new Sky Bar.



It's time to try the new Sky Bar. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF/THE BOSTON GLOBE



Louise Mawhinney sells Sky Bar shirts in her store. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF/THE BOSTON GLOBE

The crinkly yellow wrapper looks just right. When I go to rip it open, I notice a tiny message printed in black at one end: the date, and then the words "THANKS DEVRA!" This is my Golden Ticket.

The rich smell of chocolate wafts forth. Inside, on a little white raft, sits the bar. The four sections, the fanlike etching, it's all here. The Necco logo is no longer imprinted in the chocolate on top. Now it just says "SKY BAR." Independence is sweet.

There is a proper order to this: caramel, vanilla, peanut, fudge. I break off the first section. It's not a contest. The chocolate is so much better than the waxy coating on the last Sky Bar I ate, which was the last Sky Bar I thought I'd ever eat. The caramel is silky smooth. It raises no alarms and merits no particular praise, which tells me it must be pretty darn close to the original, my favorite of the old Sky Bar fillings. The vanilla is sweet and lightly

gritty, a little like a glaze you might make from confectioners' sugar, only thicker. (For me it was always the weakest link, and I'm not changing my mind.) Then the peanut, which turns out to be the tour de force. I didn't like the old version much. This new filling tastes like actual roasted peanuts. It's excellent. And, for the finish, the fudge, which is like a squishier version of the shell that contains it.

There isn't any doubt about it. All of this might have been lost. Instead, it tastes better than ever.

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