

T MAGAZINE

One-Thing Shops: Licorice, Berlin

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One-Thing Shops

By ALEX RONAN

“I went from marketing to the markets themselves and let’s just say people were a bit surprised,” says Ilse Böge. In 1996, she gave up her job as a financial consultant in Berlin to start hawking something very different: licorice. “The first bank I went to for a loan pretty firmly suggested I sell children’s clothes, nuts, chocolates, basically anything in addition to licorice, but I wanted to specialize,” she says.

Böge grew up in the German town of Emden on the coast of the North Sea; the taste of the Netherlands’ salty licorice was part of her childhood. “For years, I’d beg visiting friends and family to bring some good, salty licorice,” Böge says, adding, “I realized I might not be the only one missing it.” So she drove due north, filled a friend’s car with 70 varieties of licorice, and started selling from a stand in Berlin’s Winterfeldtmarkt street market. A year later, she opened Berlin’s first (and only) licorice store, **Kado**, in the city’s Kreuzberg neighborhood, though the shop has since moved across the street and into a bigger space.

When she opened shop, Berliners were used to two types of licorice — the excessively sweet Haribo variety and the medicinal pastilles doled out by pharmacies. “Some people would try the salty licorice and grimace, but others were quite pleased by the taste,” Böge says. “Germans from the South tend to prefer the sweeter varieties, while those from the North enjoy saltier offerings.” Northern Europeans have historically relied on salted meat and fish to get them through long winters; a taste for salt has influenced their sweet predilections. For a sense of how intense Northern European licorice gets, take the saltiness of salt water taffy and multiply it by 10.

Kado imports licorice from 10 countries and stocks powder, tea, liquors, syrup, roots, and even toothpaste — all flavored with licorice. But most customers are partial

to the gummies, which come in numerous shapes and flavors. Varieties from Italy, France and Belgium are often made by small, family-owned operations and often infused with local ingredients like mint, violet, honey or laurel. Salmiak licorice, for example, is seasoned with rock salt and produced in Nordic and Baltic countries. In addition to selling to regulars, Kado gets strange orders from licorice-lovers in far-flung locations, including a monk who ordered by post from the Brazilian jungle. “I actually just got a call from a prisoner in Berlin,” Böge says, of a local order. “They’re allowed to have one package weighing two kilos a year and he wanted to order two kilos of licorice.”

Though they stock what may be the largest variety of licorice in the world, there’s one request they haven’t been able to satisfy. “At least once a week, someone who was a child in the G.D.R. [German Democratic Republic] in the ’70s will come in and ask about the G.D.R. licorice stick,” Böge says. “Eventually, we found record of the company in historical archives.” As was common practice, the candy company had been taken over and transformed into a cooperatively run business under G.D.R. leadership. Their first product was a licorice stick. After much searching, Böge was able to track down the licorice master.

“When we finally found him, he wasn’t able to answer any questions due to dementia,” she says. Though the original recipe has been lost, Kado is working on a licorice stick inspired by the one that children once enjoyed in the G.D.R. “Our customers are what’s most important to us,” she adds. “To be able to give them a taste of their childhoods is an honor.”

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