

HOORAY...FOG CITY NEWS CELEBRATES 20 YEARS!

by Geri Koeppel
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We dare you not to lose yourself in the awesomeness of the magazine racks at Fog City News.

Photo credit: Sonja Malik

It's all too obvious that the quirky character of San Francisco is being eroded by the generic sameness of robot coffee bars, mediocre salad spots, chain drug stores and pricey hipster brand showrooms replicated in tony neighborhoods everywhere from here to Wicker Park to Manhattan.

So it's heartening to hear that one fun, locally owned downtown shop is celebrating its 20th anniversary. On Nov. 8 and 9, Fog City News—San Francisco's foremost purveyor of international chocolates and periodicals—will feature an in-store visit by a Bay Area chocolatier, drawings for

chocolate prizes, and a storewide discount for “insiders.”

Fog City News is an independent business—one of only a handful along Market Street from Powell to the Ferry Building—that has survived a major recession and the gradual shift from brick-and-mortar to online retail. How? By offering an incredible inventory and top-notch customer service.

In just over 900 square feet, this FiDi institution sells more than 1,200 publications from around the world on a dazzling array of subjects—from literary journals to international newspapers to drool-worthy design mags—along with a highly curated selection of 450 chocolate bars and chocolate items, 1,000 greeting cards, and a smattering of journals, gadgets and novelty items. The store has won the Best of the Bay awards' “Best Newsstand” for 20 years running.



Get your news of the world, along with literary journals, hip design magazines and more, at Fog City News.

Photo credit: Sonja Malik

Proprietor Adam Smith acknowledged the changes in the retail atmosphere: “When you buy online, you’re casting a vote for online shopping,” he said. “You can’t have it both ways: You’re going to have to start buying things in a physical setting if you want these stores to exist.” He encourages people to pick three local shops they love—“stores that you would really be upset if they closed”—and try to spend money at each of them once a month.

Smith has built a loyal customer base thanks to his unique product selection and an “insiders club” which is free to join; all you have to do is provide your email address. Members get a monthly email newsletter listing dozens of “silent specials” (available only if you read the newsletter and mention them at check-out) and free monthly blind chocolate tastings. During these sessions you might hear things like this: “I’m picking up a hint of pear, cinnamon, cream and licorice, with roasted cashew, heavy cream, buttery toasted almonds, coconut and an aftertaste of honeydew melon and tiramisu.”

Longtime Fog City News customer Lauren Jensen of Berkeley keeps track of her tastings in an Excel sheet and estimates she has tried between 300 and 400 unique chocolate bars from the shop. “It’s a bit like wine tasting, only frankly, more sophisticated because there’s a broader expanse of flavors that are incorporated in chocolate tasting,” she said. She added that Smith

and his staff “are superlative at finding these new artisans and selecting who’s putting out a good product.”

Jensen said Fog City News rises above other stores thanks to the amount of high-quality bars, the breadth of knowledge of Smith and his employees, and the customer service. “All the staff are really encouraged to recognize and know the regular customers,” she said. “It’s nice after a long day to stroll in and have people recognize you.” That friendliness makes you want to come back, she said. “It becomes a favorite place to stop by periodically.”



*Chocoholics, rejoice: Fog City News sells 200 kinds of artisan bars and dozens of bon-bons.
Photo credit: Sonja Malik*

Smith said when it comes to owning a business, as with buying a home, “location, location, location” is key. Being in the heart of the FiDi with hundreds of thousands of workers coming in daily and countless tourists traversing Market Street, the shop is well situated. But he added that “service, service, service” is the second-most important factor, and one that most entrepreneurs don’t always understand.



*Fog City News owner Adam Smith and his staff taste hundreds of chocolate bars each year to choose the best for their shelves.
Photo credit: Sonja Malik*

A big part of that is reacting to customers’ tastes and desires. When Fog City News opened as a traditional newsstand, Smith said, he carried a big specialty tobacco selection. Over time, that was phased out in favor of more and more greeting cards. “That really was a surprise for me,” he said, when customers began asking for them. Even with the proliferation of

Papyrus and a giant American Greetings store literally on the next block, his clientele could not get enough of his more interesting offerings.

Smith sells 50 different lines, ranging from individually made letterpress cards to naughty cards—in fact, usually more than 100 cards on display contain at least one swear word. One of the latest lines boldly proclaim anti-Trump statements with the appropriate sentiment in small letters underneath, such as, “TRUMP IS A PIECE OF SHIT. Happy Birthday!”



Choose from hundreds of funny, naughty and handmade cards for that perfect sentiment.

Photo credit: Sonja Malik

When you buy chocolates or cards from Fog City News, you're not just supporting Smith and his staff, but all of the artisans whose products he carries. “Our challenge is to convince a new customer that it's worth a higher price,” he said. One of the lines Smith carries is Donnelly Chocolates out of Santa Cruz, another small operation who gets exposure and a manageable wholesale account. “I don't want someone like Starbucks to say, ‘I want to put you in 500 stores,’ because I couldn't do it,” Donnelly said. “It's helpful for us to have a couple small accounts that order small quantities on a regular basis.”

Donnelly said he doesn't know of anyplace in the country that carries as many fine chocolate bars as Fog City News. He made the distinction, too, that Smith doesn't just carry any old artisan chocolates, which can vary widely in quality. He chooses carefully which ones get shelf space and has evaluated more than 4,000 bars over the years.

“I didn't realize how much work he did tasting and weeding out and looking for new products,” Donnelly said. “It's a pretty narrow door to get through at Fog City News. The people who go there have an expectation.”

Fog City News 20th Anniversary Celebration

Where: 455 Market St. (between First and Fremont), San Francisco

When: Nov. 8 and 9, 2019

What: In-store appearance by Michael Mischer of Michael Mischer Chocolates, 12:30 to 2 p.m. Nov. 8; free tastes for the first 50 attendees; prize drawings, including a 40-truffle gift assortment donated by Richard Donnelly of Donnelly Chocolates; storewide discounts for members; limited edition 20th anniversary shirts available for purchase while supplies last

Hours: 10 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. Monday through- Friday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday