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Books

Review: ‘Nutella World’ delves deep into that jar of hazelnut spread

By James Norton October 2

There are certain brands that transcend mere product-hood. Through their intrinsic qualities and skillful marketing, they command our devotion and the feelings we generally reserve for our children, our pets and our spouses, according to food writer Gigi Padovani. Think Coca-Cola or Apple.

Is Nutella a worthy member of this pantheon?

In his comprehensive book “Nutella World,” Padovani makes a strong case that the chocolaty hazelnut spread has more than earned that honor. Nutella, he writes, has “been described as an expression of the soul, a consuming passion, and the symbol of a generation.” Born in the same town where Nutella was created, Padovani may be biased, but his book is more than a celebration of his home town’s sweet delicacy. It’s a sweeping story about the company that made this luscious compound and about the man behind it, the late Michele Ferrero.

The book explores Nutella’s journey from a small kitchen in Alba to a multinational phenomenon. Padovani examines the product’s supply chain and analyzes its marketing presence and rabid online following. He gleefully dives into the details, such as the number of pounds of cocoa required to make Ferrero’s products annually (264 million), the number of internal product tastings the company does per month (33,900) and the ethnic breakdown of the Ferrero Group’s workforce (a plurality of Italians, followed by Germans, Indians, French and Polish).

Padovani’s grasp of the modern digital landscape is occasionally shaky, but he strains heroically to define and describe Nutella’s reach in terms of fans, followers, friends and other concrete metrics. (About 17 million Tweets contained the word “Nutella” between August 2013 and August 2014.) In the process, he argues that Nutella isn’t a mere product: It’s a daily breakfast ritual, a transnational sensation that brings people together across borders, and a culinary touchstone that has changed the way dessert works, from San Francisco to Moscow to Perth.

At times, you might need a strong stomach to get “Nutella World” down. Although it contains a robust amount of data and plentiful citations, it’s also sweetened with a reverence for its subject that borders on obsession. There is no marketing Web site too minor or internal corporate message too obscure to escape notice by Padovani, who

works with the feverish positivity of a court scribe. Whose Web site anticipated Facebook before Facebook was created? Nutella's. What was the topic of "one of the most viral tweets ever produced"? Nutella. (Mind you, that tweet was by Lady Gaga.) And then there's this:

"Can simply anything become myth? French philosopher and semiotician Roland Barthes (1915-1980) believed so. In his classic book 'Mythologies' (1957; English trans. 1972), he wrote that every object can pass from a mute existence to an 'oral state': 'Myth is a system of communication; it is a message.'" Thus: Nutella as Holy Grail. The idea is both more and less absurd than it initially seems, and wrestling with the author's deification of his subject makes "Nutella World" by turns frustrating, thought-provoking and hilarious.

James Norton is the author of "[Lake Superior Flavors](#)" and the editor of [the Heavy Table](#), an online magazine about food and drink in the Upper Midwest.

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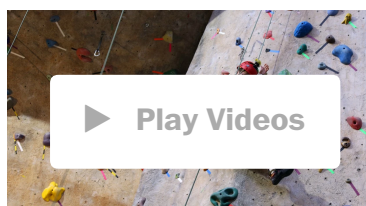
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