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If chocolate is an aphrodisiac, the 600 block of West Kinzie is an erogenous zone.

The Blommer's Chocolate factory has been roasting cocoa beans since 1939, when brothers Henry, Al and Bern Blommer opened in River North. The 270,000-square-foot factory makes for one of the most distinctive downtown smells, a sweet fudgy scent that travels well on warm, breezy days.

But with all of the residential buildings going up around the old brick factory, Blommer's has taken steps to quell the smell.

"Actually, about a year ago, we spent \$700,000 for incineration equipment to reduce the odor," said Blommer's vice president Jack Larsen. "We've reduced the aroma about 90 percent. You can still smell it. It depends on which way the wind blows. No one has objected to the smell. But you always worry that someone might."

The cocoa bean is the mighty building block for making chocolate. The roasting and processing of the bean into chocolate liquor is what produces the aroma. The key to making good chocolate is to remove the shell of the cocoa bean and get to the center part, called the nib.

The nib is the main source of cocoa butter, which contains the flavor. Blommer's, whose Chicago factory annually produces 170 million pounds of chocolate, is the largest processor of cocoa beans in America. Blommer's also has plants in East Greenville, Pa., and Union City, Calif., near San Francisco.

Most of America's major food manufacturers buy chocolate from Blommer's.

"Chances are that if you eat chocolate, you're eating Blommer's chocolate," Larsen said. "We don't sell any branded products because we don't want to compete with our customers."

But Blommer's does have a factory store that's open to the public between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. weekdays. You can find nearly 500 variations of chocolate, including almonds, pretzels and turtle bites (pecan, caramel and chocolate in one bite at \$3.50 a half pound).

Customers are so euphoric when they enter the store, some are willing to share their deepest secrets--such as a snack bar recipe one client gave to store manager Dan Gassert.

"She melted butterscotch, regular chocolate and peanut butter chips in with marshmallows and Rice Krispies cereal treat and rolled it out," Gassert said. "It was incredible."

Clerks Anna Chrzan and Sophia Radosz will be glad to show you around. Both natives of Poland, they have an Old World sweet charm about them. Anna and Sophia go together, well, like milk and chocolate. Years ago, their sons attended Casimir Pulaski elementary school together.

Asked if she ever gets tired of the smell of chocolate, Sophia answered, "Not tired. The word is `fat.' "

Before coming to Blommer's in the early 1990s, Anna worked at the late Busy Bee diner in Wicker Park. Anna and Sophia agree that chocolate is an aphrodisiac.

"We can tell when someone is in love. They buy that," Sophia said, and she nodded to a 10-pound Alpine dark chocolate bar, one of the store's most popular items.

Just like romance, there is an air of mystery to the downtown chocolate scent.

"People notice the odor, especially people on the (Metra) train coming by," Larsen said. "It's funny, they don't know the company's name or where it originates. But they all love that chocolate smell."