

March 23, 2003---

HERSHEY, Pa.--When you dream of spas, there's always Elizabeth Arden. Or the Connie Stevens Garden Sanctuary in Los Angeles. And a resplendent Helena Rubenstein Spa in the SoHo section of New York.

But Milton Hershey?

There may as well be an Augie Busch Spa in my neophyte-spa mind.

But it's true.

The three-story 17,000-square-foot Spa at the Hotel Hershey opened in January 2001. It is one of the East Coast's most popular spas. You can guess why: There are nearly a dozen chocolate-flavored packages.

For example, the popular Chocolate Fondue Wrap begins with body brushing followed by a fondue of warmed moor mud and an essence of cocoa application. A warm blanket wrap and the Hershey Vichy Shower follows.

I don't know if Hershey had this in mind when he broke ground for the Hershey Chocolate Co. factory 100 years ago this spring.

The spa is part of the Hotel Hershey, about 15 miles east of Harrisburg, Pa. The 234-room hotel was built in 1933 after Hershey visited Europe. He chose a classic Mediterranean design and had the hotel built during the Depression as part of his "Great Building Campaign."

The hotel is listed with the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Recent guests have included Cyndi Lauper, John Travolta and Cher. Last October, Cher opened the new 12,500-seat Giant Center arena down the road from the hotel.

The spa is influenced by High Point Mansion, the Hershey home of Milton and Catherine Hershey (now corporate headquarters, not open to the public). The spa landings are marble, and all massage and facial rooms have hardwood floors and light yellow walls. Yellow is a predominant color in the spa. It was Catherine Hershey's favorite color.

Jennifer Wayland-Smith is spa director at the hotel.

She previously was assistant spa director of Spa Internazionale at Fisher Island Club in Miami, where clients included Demi Moore and Meg Ryan. She's been with Hershey since June 2000. "The key here is taking traditional spa services and putting a chocolate twist to them," Wayland-Smith said during a Sunday morning conversation in the hotel's Fountain Lobby. "We would have been foolish not to build on that chocolate theme."

That's how moor mud was built into the fondue wrap.

For centuries Europeans have used moor mud to relieve stiff joints and rheumatoid arthritis. Wayland-Smith said, "Spas have been using it to coat the body from neck to toe. It's rich in nutrients and minerals. We looked at it and said, 'Gosh, it looks like brownie batter,' and wondered what would happen if we added an essence of cocoa to it. So now it smells and looks like melted chocolate. A lot of people ask, 'Does it taste like chocolate?' The poor therapist always answers, 'No, it tastes like mud.' But there's always that one person that just has to taste it. It's all about fun. Another time we had a woman come in for a whipped cocoa bath and she actually brought her own bag of marshmallows."

During my recent visit to the spa, I had a signature Cocoa Massage (a traditional Swedish massage), where I was seasoned like a salmon with cocoa-scented massage oil.

This was a lot more enriching than the only other professional massage I have received, back in 1985 when Jimmy the Masseur whacked me around at the Division Street Russian Baths, 1916 W. Division. Jimmy had just arrived in Chicago from Romania and barely knew English. All he said was, "Better than two drinks, EH?"

Conversely, at Hershey, I saw myself as the inspiration for the 1975 Hot Chocolate hit "You Sexy Thing."

"Chocolate is truly an aphrodisiac," Wayland-Smith said. "Obviously when taken internally. We don't have people running around here sighing, 'Oh, I'm in love!' But it has been proven that when taken internally, dark chocolate is rich in antioxidants, to help stave off cancer. We're just using it more from an aromatherapy standpoint. It gives you the warm fuzzies."

* * *

Before my spa treatment, I slipped into a white robe and sandals. I felt more like Milton Berle in L.A. than Milton Hershey in P.A.

Clients have the option of hanging out in the "Quiet Room" before, after or during a treatment. I did not go into the Quiet Room. I was intimidated by a half-dozen women sitting around in white robes with their hair up.

Cakes, coffee, tea and some mean hot chocolate is served in the room, modeled after Milton Hershey's billiard room. The Quiet Room includes reading material and is anchored by a fireplace finished in pecan. The third-floor room overlooks the Hershey gardens and nearby mountain ranges.

The spa employs 30 massage therapists.

Larry Huff was my therapist. A native of the Pocono region of Pennsylvania, Huff has been doing massage therapy since 1999. Before that he was working in high-rise exterior building maintenance along the East Coast. I guess people have always looked up to Huff. That's why we began with me lying face up under thin white sheets.

Huff dimmed the lights and the same kind of soothing New Age music you hear in Galena gift shops filled the room. As he began with a slip and glide over my Detoured muscles, Huff explained, "The music helps keep the pace of my massage at a nice steady, slow pace."

Huff obtained certification in Hatha Yoga at the Himalayan International Institute in Honesdale, Pa. He also has advanced training in orthopedic massage, which deals with soft tissue injury like rotator cuff problems. He has worked on a few Hershey Bears (the minor league hockey team based in Hershey) and the U.S. and Canadian Olympic soccer teams when they were based in Hershey for the Summer Olympic trials.

For someone who works with chocolate every day, Huff was slim. "I don't eat sweets," he admitted. "But I love the smell. Especially in the spring or summer, there's the smell of chocolate and peanut butter from the Reese's factory Hershey Foods is contracted to produce Reese's peanut butter cups at a separate factory space. It's fun to work with this. We have a peppermint salt scrub, and you can follow that up with a chocolate fondue wrap.

"So it would be a Peppermint Patty."

I rolled over and nestled my forehead into a headrest. I learned the Huffs have a six-month-old son named Liam who gets massages on a daily basis. "Infant massages are good for colicky babies," Huff said. "The touch alone helps them with bowel movements. We also do baby yoga. We touch his toes to his nose, making sure he has a range of motion. It helps with circulation." This was a massage with a message.

CD & P Health Products Inc. of New Jersey creates all cocoa scent ingredients used in the spa. For example, with the Chocolate Bean Polish, Hershey Foods shells and cuts imported cocoa beans into husks. CD & P obtains the husks from Hershey, mixes them with ground-up walnut shells (obtained from another source) and formulates the final product for the spa.

The chocolate-infused invention is called "Essence of Cocoa." It is not sold to the public. But many chocolate-scented products used in treatments such as the Chocolate Bean Polish and Cocoa Body Moisturizer can be purchased at the spa.

When I revisit the \$7 million spa this summer, I will try the Rosario Sea Soak. The seaweed and salt treatment is named after the town of Rosario, Cuba, where Milton

Hershey once had a sugar plantation. "We thought it would be a great way to incorporate the ocean therapy treatments that are popular in the spas," Wayland-Smith said.

Each of the therapists has an individual style of massage. Huff said, "I like to give 'em like I like to get 'em. I like to get a good amount of pressure. I like to have a nice flow, so it's also relaxing. It also depends on what someone is coming in for. If the person is an athlete, I'll do stretches along with massage. It pulls away from the flow, but it still gives them something their body needs." And who doesn't need to get in touch with cocoa now and then?