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CATALOG CRITIC

The \$19 Apple: Treat or Trick?

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Candy apples used to come in two varieties: red and sticky, or caramel and sticky. But lately this Halloween treat has added a few new tricks.

Many candy-makers are pitching caramel apples as gourmet desserts, wrapping them in pricey chocolate, rolling them in dried cranberries, pecans or macadamia nuts and, last but not least, adding double-digit price tags. As with so much else Halloween, they've become big business. Illinois-based Affy Tapple makes about two million apples with the Mrs. Prindables brand every year. (Sales also include "themed" apples for everything from weddings to Hanukkah.) This month, Williams-Sonoma introduced a line of Halloween-themed apples wrapped in dark chocolate from California boutique maker Guittard; one offering weighs more than two pounds, costs \$19.50 and, at 140 calories per slice, is meant to serve 17.

Epicurean Event

So this Halloween season, we picked caramel apples from five retailers and convened a tasting panel of "experts" -- namely, sweet-toothed parents who wanted more this year than their kids' leftover chocolate bars. The prices raised eyebrows, and it took some work to find apples that evoked real enthusiasm. But after eating our way through five samples, we decided that, done right, the candy apple can be an epicurean event.


Our first lesson: A pretty caramel apple is not necessarily a great caramel apple. Take Mrs. Prindables' \$29.95 Halloween 4-Pack. It was a smart presentation, with dark and orange-colored white chocolate and Halloween wrappings. But the chocolate had a waxy, commercial taste; one panelist decreed that Mrs. Prindables were more for show. Our next try, from Fudge House, didn't score on taste or presentation: At \$6.75 apiece, its caramel chocolate swirl and caramel walnut apples had bitter-flavored walnuts and middling chocolate.

Erin's Gourmet Apples made a stronger visual statement. Each Triple Striped Caramel Apple (\$16.95 apiece) weighed 1.5 pounds, including an outer shell of dark, milk and white chocolate. But in place of the traditional, tart Granny Smith apples, Erin's used sweet Fujis. "Three layers of sweet," complained one panelist. (Williams-Sonoma, whose apples weren't available in time for our test, also uses Fujis.)

With the DeBrito Chocolate Factory, though, we had a breakthrough. DeBrito also subscribed to the bigger-is-better philosophy, but its apples met with solid panel approval. Its Apple Pack came with four varieties -- Pumpkin Pie, Apple Pie a la Mode, Toffee Apple and Earthquake. Our panelists thought the Earthquake in particular lived up to its billing as a "seismic sensation" of caramel, Rice Krispies, peanut butter and chocolate. The apples came packaged in a reusable insulated cooler, tempting us to name DeBrito as our Best Value. But \$45 for four apples? That kind of value is relative, at best, so this week we name only a Best Overall.

Nuts to That

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That award goes to Amy's Candy Kitchen -- specifically, its Gourmet Pecan Turtle Caramel Apple with Dark Belgian Chocolate (\$13.99 apiece) and Gourmet Dark Belgian Chocolate Dunked Caramel Apple (\$12.99 each). These apples struck the right balance between tart and sweet -- and were gloriously decadent at the same time. "I really taste the dark chocolate," said one panelist. "The nuts make it," said another. In other words, this was a grown-up Halloween confection. No tricks, all treat.

* * *



Shira Kronzon

Amy's Candy Kitchen

Gourmet Pecan Turtle Caramel Apple with Dark Belgian Chocolate
\$13.99 each

Gourmet Dark Belgian Chocolate Dunked Caramel Apple
\$12.99 each

800-513-8889

amyscandykitchen.com¹

Quality: *Best Overall.* Sinfully rich, thanks to the dark chocolate, with the sweetness nicely offset by the tart apple. Plenty of pecans in the "turtle" variety.

Shipping Cost/Time: Individually packaged in classy boxes. \$42.44 for overnight shipping; our order arrived on the appointed day.

Return Policy: Company will refund or replace any damaged shipments. For satisfaction issues, call "for a full resolution."

Phone/Web Experience: .Easy ordering online from this Milwaukee-area retailer, which runs a candy shop. . (Check out its chocolate fountain rentals for weddings.)

Comment: More than a dozen caramel-apple varieties, with sampler packages from \$21.99 to \$121.99.