



Veni's Sweet Shop

LINDA SWARKAN
CONTINUES A NILES
TRADITION AS
OWNER/OPERATOR OF
VENI'S SWEET SHOP

Photos and Story by Phil Eich,
Storyville Social, as part of the
Michigan Main Street Story
Series

"In February of 2008, we saw an article in the Niles Daily Star that the Marazita family, the owners of Veni's Sweet Shop, needed to sell the business or close because they were retiring. Lisa Croteau, the DDA and Main Street Director here in Niles, was helping screen potential buyers.

I think my husband and I were at Lisa's office by 10:00 AM.

My husband and I also came into the shop all the time, just as customers, because we loved what Veni's was making. It had a great reputation and history and we thought it was something we could build on and continue to evolve.

We explained who we were, that we had sold our business

the year before and were looking for our next move. Part of the reason she was screening buyers was to weed out anyone who came in thinking, 'Running a candy shop will be easy and fun!'. Because of what the business was, how important it was to the community, and that it was going to be a lot of work filling the shoes of the Marazitas in a business like Veni's, they wanted to make sure it would end up in the hands of someone who could keep it successful. Previously, we had owned five stores in South Bend with 50 employees, and had been doing it since 1985, so we knew this was going to be a lot of work and were prepared to do whatever it took to make it successful.

I met the owners later that evening. It was on a Friday and Mary Marazita needed help making all the candy for Easter. I told her I would volunteer to help her out and to start learning.

Within 30 days we owned the place.

Most of this was learning on the job. Mary stayed for a year to help get us through each holiday because she said each one was different in terms of what and how much candy needed to be made, so she stayed on to help with that.

There's actually something that was called 'Chocolate Boot Camp' at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I went there for a week. I went to caramel school down in St. Augustine, Florida. I went to as many Retail Confectioners International trade group events, classes, seminars and workshops that I could.

And then I got very lucky. Around 2010, I got a resume from someone who had been making candy for 10 years. She knew me from my previous business and knew we weren't going to mess this up. I got very lucky with hiring Sandy—not only because she's wonderful and we fit together really well—but because she taught me things that I had no clue about. She was trained by a wonderful candy maker and it was a total blessing.

She retired officially in July of last year, but she came back for candy cane-making season, because she and I are the only two who know how to make candy canes. She and I flew to Cape Cod half a dozen years ago to a small, woman-run shop and they taught us how

to make candy canes. Four women make all their candy canes, so we had to adapt to learn how to do it with just two people. We made 18 different flavors of Candy Canes this year.

We offer a very large selection of handmade chocolates and candies. One time, we had somebody who wanted one of everything and it ended up being a five-pound box. We sell tons and tons of fudge and we have like 18 different flavors. We really have never seen anything anywhere else with the volume and the variety that we have, and everything we make is GOOD! I know I'm biased...but I was a customer here first!

We use high quality ingredients. Depending on the candy, there's different steps involved and things that you have to be mindful of. We do small batches frequently—we are not mass-produced and we make almost everything here on-site. We still cook on an ancient stove and with a copper kettle, which I love, because some of this equipment is probably from the 30s.



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People want to support downtown Niles and they want to support the businesses in downtown Niles, so we try to make it easy for them: we are open seven days a week. Monday through Saturday 9:00 to 7:00, Sundays 12:00 to 5:00 and we only shut down on major holidays like New Year's Day, Easter, Memorial Day, Labor Day, Christmas and Thanksgiving.

We still have people who come in and tell stories about this place. We started as a fruit and nut company in the 1930s and transitioned into a soda fountain with handmade chocolates in 1976 or 1977. Then the soda fountain was removed and we went strictly to the handmade chocolates. We still have people who will come in and like to tell their stories about when they were kids and the soda fountain and jukebox were here and all that. They're very nostalgic, and they're very appreciative that we have kept it going.

I enjoy the front end with the customers. I enjoy the middle part cooking and I get to read books while I stir. I enjoy the back part which is the dipping of the chocolate as well.

I got very lucky—I just enjoy it so much, every part of it."

-Linda Swarkan, Veni's Sweet Shop, Niles, Michigan

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