



At a Glance

Brown & Haley

Headquarters: Fife, Wash. (165,000 sq. ft.)

Plant: Tacoma, Wash. (110,000 sq. ft., three major lines)

Sales: \$60 million - \$70 million (Candy Industry estimate)

Employees: 300

Output: 2.5 million Roca brand pieces daily

Roca brand confections are sold in 65 countries

Brands: Almond Roca, Cashew Roca, Mocha Roca, Peppermint Roca, Dark Roca, Macadamia Roca, Sea Salt Caramel Roca, Roca Thins, Mountain Bars, Mountain Thins

Products: Buttercrunch toffee, chocolate bark, caramel, clusters, chocolate mints, bars.

Management team: Pierson Clair, vice chairman & ceo; John Melin, president and coo; David Armstrong, sr. v.p. supply chain /operations; Sara Clair, director of product development; Ken Rosenberg, director of U.S. sales; Rick Nicks, director of international sales; Kathi Rennaker, director of marketing.

By Bernard Pacyniak // EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

It's an impressive resume: Chocolatier; entrepreneur; political activist; consultant; new product developer; foundation chairman; industry volunteer; philanthropist. Of course, let's not forget wife, mother and foodie.

Sara Clair's accomplishments cover a lot of territory. But if there are two reoccurring themes that connect *Candy Industry's* 72nd Kettle Awards recipient to all the hats she's worn and wears, it's chocolate and the kitchen table.

As one might expect, Clair's love of chocolate started at an early age, and at the kitchen table.

"I was 8 when I made my first batch of chocolate chip cookies," she says. "Brownies followed shortly thereafter."

As Clair goes on to explain, her mother was an excellent cook. And one of her grandmothers was a baker and candy maker, albeit not a professional.

"She simply made it for the family," she adds.

Oh yes, cook books happened to be her romance novel of choice as a tween.

"I loved reading the *Good Housekeeping* cook books, eventually moving up to Julia Child and Lenotres."

But Clair did more than simply enjoy reading cook books, she embraced the craft.

"Food is my art," she exclaims. "It was fun for me to experiment."

The experiment evolved into experience as she began working in catering while in high school, eventually specializing in making desserts and confections.

"You have to remember that at the time [mid 1970s], the Bay Area, beginning with Chez Panisse, was the leading edge for food entrepreneurs," Clair points out.

It was within that environment Clair enrolled at Stanford University, taking her culinary creativity with her. It's no surprise then that Clair's major was going to be "interdisciplinary," a self-driven program that involved taking formal classes alongside research courses.

"You could take business school classes alongside industrial engineering; it was a marvelous time," she recalls with a smile.

It was during this period (1978) that Clair not only took on a full academic load, but also kicked off her new business, chocolate truffles. The enterprising young woman had developed a methodology to extend the shelf-life of her premium, fresh cream *Silver Elegance* truffles.

She hand-dipped at night, attended classes in the morning and delivered to the Bay area's gourmet retailers in the afternoon. Driven is one way to describe her.

With Mt. Rainer as a backdrop, Sara Clair, Brown & Haley's director of product development, proudly holds the 72nd Kettle Award in front of the Memorial Globe in Tacoma's Thea's Park. Photo by Pierson Clair IV.

BROWN & HALEY
— 100 YEARS —

ALMOND
ROCA®

Brown & Haley's director of product development takes home *Candy Industry's* 72nd Kettle Award. Her recipe for success lies in the scientific method, spreadsheets and sheer drive.



METHOD & Moxie



Sara and Pierson Clair display their Kettle Awards (2017 and 2011) next to a historic copper kettle used in the production of Roca confections.

Upon completing her masters, Clair committed to starting her own business.

"I signed a lease to sublet factory space in Redwood City," she says. "The company was called the Ultimate Food Co., since chocolate is the ultimate food. I also joined RCI [Retail Confectioners International]."

In 1983, Clair looked to show her products to the world by exhibiting at the Winter Fancy Food Show in San Francisco's Moscone Center.

"At that time, there was only one Moscone Center, not like the two they have today that are connected by an underground walkway," she says. "All the new exhibitors were relegated to a room under the escalator, while established companies were located in the main room. However, 15 minutes before the show opened, I received word that a space had opened up in the main room because one company failed to arrive. The show organizers asked me, since I was first on the list [she had signed up a year in advance] if I wanted to move to the large hall. So I packed up my products and went from a 10 x 10 to a 10 x 20 booth. It was like getting an upgrade; it was marvelous. There were buyers from across the country."

Of course, it would be like Clair to register for the show a year in advance. It's part of that interdisciplinary mix that has served her so well. It's also a personality trait that caught the eye of Pierson Clair.

At the time, Pierson was working for Blommer Chocolate Co. as its West Coast Vice President. After calling on her as a



Sara Clair and Kathi Rennaker, Director of Marketing, inspect Sea Salt Caramel Roca pieces that will be launched this fall.

potential customer — he was initially rebuffed several times — Pierson realized he was attracted to the accomplished chocolatier, regardless whether she was going to buy his chocolate or not.

"I remember our first date; I took her to Ghirardelli Square," he says. "I asked if she wanted a hot fudge sundae. She declined, explaining that she sampled chocolate all day long. Well, I ordered one. It was then I noticed she began sampling my sundae. I knew then she was my kind of woman."

Marriage followed suit, then children, Elizabeth and Pierson IV. During this time, Sara continued to work as a consultant, focused on product development. As the children grew, so did their role in being their mother's taste panel.

"Everything starts in the kitchen," she explains. Thus, it wasn't unusual to see product samples laid out along with score sheets during the week. Math drills were conducted using *Oreo* cookies and *Jelly Belly* jelly beans.

Even trips to the supermarket reflected Sara's work in the kitchen as she pointed out successful new product launches on the shelves, which had their origins at home.

"How many people do you know that have a Hilliard's chocolate melter and a Robot Coupe food processor in their kitchen?" she asks.

Sara's creativity in the kitchen took on a more personal connection when Pierson accepted an offer from Brown & Haley in 1997 to become president of the company.

"It was the perfect next step," she explains. "Here was the opportunity to take a beloved iconic brand and strengthen it by adding flavors and focus."

Thus, when Sara joined Brown & Haley's research and development team in 1998, she was both thrilled and cautious.

"*Almond Roca* was what we called an 'orphan brand,'" she says. "There was just one flavor and perhaps two package sizes. *Almond Roca* was the brand. We wanted *Roca* to be the brand while introducing new flavors, such as cashews or macadamias."

Nonetheless, the first rule of thumb was to see what consumers were saying about the brand, finding out what they would like to see. Fortunately, for Sara and Pierson, a local drug store chain, Bartell's, happened to be the perfect proving ground for customer feedback.

The chain, which was 22 years older than Brown & Haley — it was founded in 1890 while Brown & Haley emerged in 1912 — had a tremendously loyal clientele who were *Almond Roca* fans.

Nonetheless, when it comes to introducing a new flavor or product, "The consumer has to give you permission," Sara

Numbers game

While reminiscing with *Candy Industry*, Pierson Clair, vice chairman of Brown & Haley and a 2011 Kettle Award recipient, compared his day-after the award experience, with his wife, Sara, the 2017 recipient.

"The day after I received the Kettle Award, I was in the booth and there were all these people coming up to me and congratulating me, from past winners and nominees to friends in the industry," he says. "Meanwhile, when Sara received the Award this year, she didn't get a chance to be in the booth on Wednesday. In fact, she had arrived early at McCormick Place to lead the Confectionery Foundation student industry day."

But people did come to the booth. Many shouted out "No. 3," in reference to Sara being only the third woman to receive the Kettle Award. Others reminded Pierson that he and Sara were only the second couple in Kettle Awards history to receive individual

awards; Ellen (1985) and Melvin (2009) Gordon being the first.

Sara acknowledges that there were many congratulatory phone calls and emails from women in the industry recognizing her accomplishment as a female. Admitting that she had butterflies that evening, Sara really didn't think that the award would go to her.

"The odds were against me," she says, pointing out that the other nominees, which included Shawn Askinosie of Askinosie Chocolate, Steven Genzoli of Ghirardelli Chocolate and Kirk Vashaw of Spangler Candy Co., represented an "outstanding" group of industry leaders.

But Sara beat the odds, as she often does. She's also optimistic that more women will follow.

"There are great women in the industry who are doing remarkable work building their companies and strengthening the industry," Sara says.



Pierson Clair helps Sara with the copper kettle during *Candy Industry's* Kettle Awards reception.

"I'm sure there will be many more women who, in the years to come, will be nominated. There's so much talent and dedication."

Oh yes, Pierson also pointed out another difference between his experience and Sara's. Flowers.

"She received so many flowers, both to the office and to the house," he says. "I never received flowers."

Of course, there was that meaningful boutonniere.

emphasizes. After experimenting and testing with a multitude of flavor options, Sara and her team launched *Mocha Roca*, which featured dark chocolate and espresso beans.

Again, thanks to extensive sampling — Brown & Haley has an outlet kiosk outside its manufacturing plant that draws loyal customers continuously, an ideal format for testing new product launches — *Mocha Roca* debuted.

It was a success, but then the groundwork had been laid for its acceptance.

As Pierson explains, it took 80 years (*Mocha Roca* debuted in 2003) before *Almond Roca* had a companion flavor.

Since then, the company has launched 14 new products and five additional *Roca* flavors — Cashew, Dark, Macadamia, Peppermint and most recently, Sea Salt Caramel.

All have been successful. Sea Salt Caramel, which will come out this fall, promises to be a rookie sensation, with expectations that it will soar to No. 2 in sales within a couple of years.

"We're a small company, and when we launch a new product, it has to be right," he says.

Of all the new *Roca* flavor launches, Dark Chocolate proved to be the most challenging.

"It was critical to find the right chocolate, one that would blend nicely with the warm butter flavors," Sara explains. "We wanted a dark chocolate component but without the strong tannins

or one that was too mild. It took us six months and 50 samples before we decided on the right chocolate.

"It's all about the scientific method," she says. "You change one thing at a time and then sample it. There are no surprises."

That process provides the R&D team the confidence it needs to choose the right recipe before launch. It also allows a free-wheeling approach to ideas and innovations.

As Pierson explains, the research and development team, which incorporates Pierson, Sara and John Melin, the company's president, and Kathi Rennaker, director of marketing, as well as heads of manufacturing and others as needed, is in constant percolation.

"I'll be walking through the plant when someone will draw me aside and tell me we should consider doing a coconut *Roca*," Pierson says. "And I'll tell them to explain this to me, the reasons why, etcetera. And I'll take it back to the team and we'll discuss it."

As it turns out, there are some production challenges with coconut, but that doesn't mean the idea is dead. It's

simply on hold for further review. In the

interim, there are plenty of projects in the pipeline, such as packaging.

"We're always updating packaging, developing different package sizes, sometimes for specialized gift baskets and other times customized for a retailer," Sara says.





Bill Kelley (holding award) from Jelly Belly is honored for his five years of service as Confectionery Foundation vice chairman. (L. to R.) Confectionery Foundation Secretary/Treasurer Katherine Clark, board members Matt Pye and Linda Sahagian, Vice Chairman Rob Nelson; Bill Kelley, outgoing vice chairman; Chairman Sara Clair and Jennifer Burke, Next Gen coordinator.



Next Generation graphic arts students are mentored by Jelly Belly's Jana Perry and Brad Smith of Utah PaperBox.



Mentor Guides Laura Bergan of Barry Callebaut and Katherine Clark of Capol LLC (far left) provide students with a taste of chocolate and its history at the Barry Callebaut booth at *Sweets & Snacks Expo*.



Promotion in Motion's Dave Fleischer (back row, right) dons a confectionery mask with students at the Melville Candy booth.

But as one would expect from an individual who has bachelor's and master's degrees, Sara's world extends beyond just product development. It also encompasses grass-roots politics, industry involvement and foundation work.

One would be remiss in not pointing out Sara and Pierson's efforts in advocating Initiative 1107, which repealed the state tax on candy in Washington.

"There were a lot of phone calls and meetings," she recalls. Six months of those, to be exact.

"It was an opportunity to educate and then hope common sense would prevail," Sara explains. It worked; the initiative to repeal the candy tax passed with a 60 percent approval rate.

Typically, one kind of success gives birth to another. In this instance, Sara's involvement in Initiative 1107 as well as her work with the Greater Metro Parks Foundation in Tacoma, led to what many view as one of her crowning achievements. In 2011, then NCA President Larry Graham asked Sara to

become chairman of the newly formed Confectionery Foundation.

"The paperwork for the foundation had just been finalized as a non-profit 501(c)(3) non-profit organization," she recalls. "Bill Kelley of Jelly Belly was asked to serve as vice-chairman. The role of the foundation was still unclear, but we had three main goals: education; philanthropy and research."

Surprisingly, all it took was one day to determine exactly what the foundation's focus should be. After



Alanna Stillo with Amy Ciaglo, Nicholas Tolzien and Mary Butka from Ferrara Candy (left) and Rick Brindle of Mondelez (right) chat with engineering students during the Career Fair organized by the Confectionery Foundation at *Sweets & Snacks Expo*.



an eight-hour strategic meeting, it was clear that the industry had jobs that needed to be filled, but that there weren't enough skilled workers to fill those jobs.

"So here it was November, and we have the largest gathering of confectionery companies in the United States coming up in May," she explains. "The challenge was how to get young people to come in and learn about the industry."

The cold-calling of schools began in earnest. The kitchen table became command central, Pierson recalls. "Sara loves spreadsheets," he adds. She does and they work for her.

At the *Sweets & Snacks Expo* in 2012 — for the first time — there were 50 students and faculty representing four schools. Despite having no funding, it was an auspicious start for the Foundation.

Now in its sixth year, The Confectionery Foundation selected 100 students and faculty from 23 schools across 10 states to learn about the industry during the *Sweets & Snacks Expo* in May. Twenty of those students were in robotic engineering programs, 20 in food science, 15 of which were advanced degree programs, 30 from culinary schools and the remaining from business, marketing, graphics, advertising, and communications programs.

"These are the kinds of students we need to fill jobs in the industry," she says. This year, the Confectionery



Foundation's Next Generation program for students visiting *Sweets & Snacks Expo* — which they do at their own cost — included a Career Fair. Seven companies — ADM, Barry Callebaut, Elmer Candy Co, Ferrara Candy Co., Edward Marc Brands, Lindt North America, and Mondelez International participated.

100 volunteers from the industry act as mentor guides, booth hosts, speakers, and company representatives at the career fair during the *Sweets & Snacks Expo*, Sara explains. The students are segregated into groups of seven or fewer matched with an appropriate guide. For example, Katherine Clark from Capol led a group of food science students while Rob Nelson from Elmer's Candy, guided business students and Mary Beth Geraci, Carlin Group, hosted marketing.

The student groups typically have two booth appointments scheduled in the morning, which allows them time

to be guided through the Expo. "Then there's lunch in the briefing room," she continues. "So, for example, we had a panel of young professionals discussing the transition in business communication skills from college to the professional world. Engineering students engaged in discussion with Herm Rowland, Karen Brown and Jim Greenberg while others were given a virtual reality tour by Mark Lozano of tna North America."

The Career Fair follows lunch and then there's a return to the show floor. A Thank You reception concludes the day's activities, whereby college students mingle and share their resumes with the mentor guides and other industry professionals.

Organizing such an effort with so many moving parts can be overwhelming. Thank goodness for Sara's love of spreadsheets. The "spreadsheet lady" proudly displays a color-coded poster board that



Sara Clair (far left) and Pierson Clair (top center) join the National Confectioner Association's Libby Taylor (front, center) during the Washington Forum last September. (Photo courtesy of *Candy & Snack Today*)



Sara Clair presents program speakers Anthony Takitani, chairman, Hawaiian Host; Keith Sakamoto, ceo and president, Hawaiian Host; and Charles Morrison, president, East-West Center; with gifts during the 2015 Western Candy Conference held in Maui, Hawaii.

“

It's all about the scientific method. You change one thing at a time and then sample it. There are no surprises.

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SARA CLAIR,
DIRECTOR OF PRODUCT
DEVELOPMENT, BROWN & HALEY

detailed all student and mentor guide activities during that Wednesday at the *Sweets & Snacks Expo*. Event planners, take note.

Obviously, the Confectionery Foundation has come a long way. Sara credits the volunteers, many of them executives and leaders in the industry, who willingly give their time. And there's more to come: the organization is in the process of working with companies to establish internships and an engineering scholarship fund and expanding the map of American candy factory tours and outlets at ConfectionLink.org/plan-trip. Naturally, this year's Kettle Awards recipient invites anyone who's interested in volunteering to send her an email at Foundation@ConfectionLink.org

As intense as is her involvement in the Confectionery Foundation, she's also vested in the NCA's CandyPAC and Washington Forum, urging all candy makers and suppliers to participate.



High school robotic students tour the Brown & Haley manufacturing plant with Sara Clair.



WeighPack's 24 head PrimoCombi multi-head weigher with three product mixing weighs product before it is bagged.



Eagle Packaging Machinery's Pick & Place Automation precisely loads each Roca container into the case while simultaneously orienting all logos to ensure that shipments are retail-ready.

"It's really an important event where members of our industry can make their voices heard in our nation's capital," Sara says. She cites the creation and growth of the Candy Caucus (members of Congress who support legislative issues involving the industry) as well as the last vote on reforming the Sugar Program in the Farm Bill (most support ever from Congressional leaders on revamping the Sugar Program).

"It's the best way to educate officials about what is important to our base, to understand how families in our communities are affected," Sara says. "They do pay attention to what we're saying. It's our chance to be engaged citizens."

And she also encourages candy makers to attend the Western Candy Conference, an organization that's close to her heart as well as her organizational prowess.

"It's just called Western because the conference is held out West, but it's open to everyone," Sara points

out. Not only is it educational and a networking gold mine, she adds, but it's done in a manner that's more relaxed and "in the spirit of the West."

Next year the Western Candy Conference will mark its 85th anniversary. And, thanks to Sara's formidable organizational skills, the group has made several improvements, ranging from earlier announcements about the annual meeting and website registrations to an improved site selection process and the introduction of sponsorship opportunities.

Despite all these accomplishments, Sara remains focused on doing the work. Regardless whether it's helping grow Brown & Haley through new product launches and new packaging; building the Confectionery Foundation's success stories; expanding participation in the Washington Forum and Western Candy Conference; or hosting guests for a Taste of the Northwest, she's on it.

Her kitchen never closes. CI