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Floral accents

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I, ME, MYSELF

Sweet impressions

MILTON BRICE BELIEVES in la dolce vita. For the vice-president (finance), Hershey's International, it is the sweet moments that add flavour to his life. By **Veathika Jain**

Milton Brice's earliest memories are sweet. As a child growing up in Puerto Rico, where tropical fruits grew lush, his staple diet included tucking into platters of fresh, plump, sweet fruit. When his sweet tooth needed a change of flavour there was always Hershey's. "It's a brand I grew up with," he says. Brice is not entirely surprised that his life trajectory has brought him to Hershey's. He has worked with Hershey's for over two and a half years now.

Through school and college Brice excelled as a student and he secured a scholarship for his undergraduate studies. He moved to America from Puerto Rico and took up biology as a subject even though he had a penchant for economics as a teenager. But as the realisation that he wanted to be a research scientist dawned it temporarily displaced his fondness for economics, and biology seemed like an obvious choice. However, a twist in the curriculum led him to study economics too. After the first class, he found himself showing up for every one of them. It eventually brought him full circle. "It was like my eyes were being opened about the fundamental truths of the world." He holds a degree in economics from Vanderbilt University, Tennessee.

For Brice, economics is the science of interaction of people. The classes he attended at university provided him with the tools he would need in the real world. "The subject explained why things were the way they were and at that point I felt the need to continue studying economics since I was learning so much," says Brice.

He did his research in economics and worked as a teaching assistant for an economics professor. The experience was so fulfilling that he decided to go even further by pursuing and earning an MBA from the University of Chicago.

Having done a summer internship with Procter & Gamble (P&G), Brice was given the opportunity to work for the multinational after graduating. "The question [at that time for me] was: do I start in the US headquarters or in Puerto Rico? It was an interesting choice as Puerto Rico was lower in terms of salary but I had always wanted to gain international experience. Back then, they wouldn't send you international until you had spent ten years with the company. I

didn't want to wait that long but they said if you work in Puerto Rico and if things go well, we'll send you out in five years."

Brice enjoyed his stint in Puerto Rico as it was a small company so he was involved in every aspect of its operations. The fact that his parents were also in Puerto Rico helped him enjoy life more. "After four years, I had my first international assignment in Venezuela."

The upward swing had begun. He moved to Japan, then on to Argentina and life by now was beginning to settle into a happy routine, but was still full of drive. He got married (he met his wife at P&G, in Venezuela).

After 16 years with P&G, Brice got an offer from AOL for their Latin American operations. In a divergent career shift, he found himself starting from scratch, although it was a hugely satisfying experience.

"This particular venture was interesting as economically I was of the view that the business model wouldn't work but I still took it up

grow it exponentially." For Brice, the excitement lay in the challenge: how do you make it work in new markets by taking on other multinational competitors? He did not know what the name of the company was but he said yes to the offer.

It turned out he had joined Hershey's. For someone who travels almost 15 days of the month, Brice, now vice-president (finance), didn't look tired to me when I met him early in the morning for this interview. He was cheerful and extremely excited about the opening of Hershey's World in Dubai.

I, ME, MYSELF

I think a sweet tooth is a blessing. If you don't have a sweet tooth you won't try new things. Having it makes life more interesting. I fall into a consumer group that likes to have chocolate in moderation, so for me sweets and chocolates are a part of the overall portfolio of food. I enjoy trying new things and new chocolates, but I am

I never cease to be surprised by how many ways there are of doing a thing. Every person has his own way of looking at things.

as a great story to be told in the future. How many chances in life do you get to do something like that?"

The challenge, at AOL Latin America, was how to make it work. "It was a small group and we were all from big companies so we had the vision of what to do." Having worked for four years with AOL, Brice got a chance to return to Argentina thanks to an offer from a steel company. "I wasn't looking to change at that point but my son was eight years old and I thought I would like him to experience living somewhere else."

He thinks it's one of the best experiences his son has had. "We were in Argentina this time for three years." And then a friend of his who works for a placement company asked him if he was interested in working for a consumer goods company worth \$5 billion (about Dh18.3 billion) who had major expansion plans.

"Their international business was about 10 per cent and they wanted to

not a chocolate connoisseur. It's a lot of fun to try chocolates from different countries. Mexico is my favourite and we have some great products from Brazil and China.

I believe in la dolce vita (the sweet life) as a general concept. I don't take that to mean sweet products; I take that as the good things in life. For me, it means the varied experiences that I have had. I would love for everyone to see the ruins in Rome or the Great Wall of China or view the animals in Africa - that's la dolce vita in my opinion. The other thing which constitutes la dolce vita for me is learning. I still remember my university years fondly as I was learning so much and that was enjoyable.

I believe a man can shape society by taking the initiative and being committed. It doesn't have to be in a political sense. I believe I am helping shape society by expanding

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With wife Edna and son Christian...
"I value my family the most in the world."

Hershey's throughout the world. From my experiences, I find that we are a part of the development of economies. Another way of shaping society is through value systems. All the companies I've worked with have been focused on integrity, on doing the right thing, impacting the community in a positive way and giving back to society. By following these principles, you definitely help build a society.

I believe a small world is a big idea because analytically speaking the world will be efficient. Efficiency implies that society is better off because various countries can specialise in what they each do best. Economically, a small world also makes everybody better off because of the integration it gives rise to. You are better off socially and humanistically having had more opportunities to know different cultures. You are then armed with the understanding of what that culture does.

I believe inspiration and influence are different. But you can create a linkage between them. Inspiration is the spark that drives you to do something, the revelation that opens the doors to the truth and influence – it has the ability to impact the outcome of something. In my experience over the years, what is greatly valued is initiative. Somebody thinks of doing something differently but the initiative to implement it is what is of value. The linkage between the inspiration and the initiative to take action is what the world builds on to evolve and change.

I never cease to be surprised by how many ways there are of doing something and they are all right. Every person is different and has his own way of looking at things; so there are multiple ways people have solved problems. For example, when I was in Latin America during the hyper-inflationary years, I learnt that you can run a business in different ways and thrive. That realisation was an



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eye-opener. It taught me that the way I do business is just as right as the other person and that there are different ways to exist.

I think waking dreams work better when you remember them. Dreaminess is the exercise or the ability to think about things differently. I have had dreams I have managed to fulfil but I still have a list of places I want to travel to, cultures that I'd like to understand and see what they have to offer. Apart from that, I have a dream to see Hershey's International become a significant player in the world.

I, ME, MYSELF

Me, chocolates (light and dark)

I tend more towards milk chocolates, so that's the light aspect. It has a creamier taste and I like the flavour. In the US, chocolate is made of liquid milk and then processed giving it a certain taste. Having said that, there are times when dark chocolate fits the occasion, either with the kind of food that's being served or the event itself. If I were to take this as an analogy to life then I would say life is a mix of both kinds. Both light and dark are contrasts and provide you with a variety of experiences.

Me and the constancy of change

Growing up in Latin America – and in particular in the hyper-inflationary years – makes one adapt to change or else one won't be able to survive. Personally, I feel change is the underlying mechanism for improvement. I wouldn't recommend

that anybody be satisfied with the status quo. Something which is good can be improved. One objective of my life is to maximise constant change through continuous improvement. Change is necessary and it's a part of everything you do in life. I don't resist it and I certainly don't have a problem with it.

Me and humility

I hope that my upbringing is what keeps me grounded. I had to work for everything I got. It was also an upbringing where material aspects were not the predominant objective; there are a lot of other things in life that are important which provide a lot more fulfilment. These beliefs keep me grounded and humble. Apart from being grounded, we as a family believe in charity as well. We are very thankful for things we have and things that we have been able to do. We help out both monetarily and by spending time with the charities we support. We enjoy volunteering a lot; my wife is involved in Boy Scouts, while all of us volunteer for community projects. Even Hershey's has a strong history of being involved in community service and that's another avenue for us to give back to society.

Me and the value I place on family

I value my family the most in the world. I have been fortunate to have parents who focused a lot on education and instilled the right values in me and my brother. Family keeps you rooted; it gives you the security of not being alone and most importantly the support you get

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Milton Brice with visitors at the Hershey's store launch in Dubai... "we are entering the UAE market as it's a fast-growing market."



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from family members is priceless. My parents left Cuba and they didn't have anything. They were starting brand new with two children; it was hard work for them. They emphasised the importance of a good education and they sacrificed a lot for that. That was the focus my family had at that point in time and they took advantage of the opportunity to educate us. It was in many ways to establish our value system, working for what your objectives are, as well as the honesty, integrity and satisfaction of being self-made. I have tried to instill the same values I got from my parents in my son as well. I have tried to get him to appreciate the many cultures, and the different people in the world.

Me and my travels around the world

When I was young, I didn't know what I wanted to be or do but one thing I knew was that I wanted to work abroad. I wanted the chance to live and work in other countries, meet people from different cultures and taste their food. Initially, of course I didn't have the money to travel around but I would still try and see every bit of Puerto Rico and then I moved to America and that opened the world for me. I have been lucky to have had a work portfolio which allows me to travel. I have worked in Latin America and loved each and every country. I always wanted to work in Asia, but I couldn't go there for work so I went to Japan and China for my honeymoon. Now Hershey's has brought me to Dubai and I absolutely love this. I travel quite a bit each month and what keeps me excited about travelling is seeing something new, meeting different people and understanding various cultures.

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Why is there a modern-day emphasis on leadership?

Leadership by definition, is the emphasis or rather an effort to try and optimise and to have a process that's

efficient. It's a trial and error process to an extent, but the important thing from that is to try and learn from the errors and move forward. I think natural leaders will emerge but there are others who will grow from a trial and error process and demonstrate their leadership skills.

Do you believe leading by example is a limiting exercise because it predefines the way we do things?

When you do things to set an example, it would imply that you have put your mind to it. I don't think about it that way. For me, the example happens simply by the way you do things and in that context, it'll be heavily influenced by your values. I don't think about the example as being the objective - it's the result of what happens.

Are chocolates and their desirability overrated? What, in your opinion, is the overwhelming truth about the true appeal of chocolates and one's state of mind?

Chocolate can certainly change a state of mind. There are some extremely passionate chocolate consumers and it's the versatility that chocolate offers multiple consumers. So I'm not sure if the desirability of chocolates is overrated. For example, when some people are depressed, it lifts their mood.

For me personally, I think the variety of chocolates available today satisfies many consumers, thereby helping them choose the type of chocolate to consume in their respective state of mind.

What does working with chocolates do to your own perception of them? Does it take away from their irresistibility?

No, not at all. Instead working with chocolates makes it more interesting as I have an understanding of where it comes from, all the trees and the beans, the steps taken to convert the raw ingredients into chocolates, the moulding, the formulation of things and how it all comes together. All this actually adds to the overall appeal of the chocolate for me. As a result of having the knowledge about the whole process, I have become popular among friends! Many times I've had conversations with people who are particularly interested in chocolates and the micron size which changes the texture and flavour of the chocolate - and then I tell them about the process. The knowledge of the chocolate-making process also makes me appreciate chocolate more.

Why has Hershey's entered the UAE market at this stage and what are your plans for this region?

We are entering this market as it's a fast-growing market and our research has shown that it's going to be doing better than average in the next few years. Dubai in particular is at a crossroads within the region; it attracts traffic from within the Middle East as well as other parts of the world and I think we have a chance to grow here because of its ideal location. Internationally, it's a strategic place for the company to expand and we are very optimistic about the growth.

- Veathika Jain is a Dubai-based freelancer

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