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A Times Square Aura for Pop-Tarts

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Poor Pop-Tarts.

As a breakfast food, these pastries have neither the nutritional cachet of cereal nor the tuck-in-a-pocket ease of a breakfast bar. As a snack, they're not quite sweet like a cookie, nor savory like a cracker. In a world on the go, Pop-Tarts can require a toaster. Even the brand name has been hijacked by gossip columnists to mock Britney Spears and Jessica Simpson.

Now the Pop-Tarts brand is demanding some attention for itself, and it is doing so with a store on one of the world's most attention-grabbing stages, Times Square.

Its promoters are calling it Pop-Tarts World. Inside, one can find a cafe selling Pop-Tarts "sushi," an hourly light show that simulates the look of frosting, a create-your-own-variety-pack vending machine.



"People say, 'Well, what can you really do with a Pop-Tart?' " said Scott Schoessel, chief operating officer of the Gigunda Group, a firm working on the project that specializes in so-called experiential marketing, or in-person events and activities. "Our chef was has come up with amazing concoctions."

Pop-Tarts is joining other food brands, like M&M's and Hershey, with stores near Times Square, where the focus is often less about sales than marketing and visibility.

"It's a confluence of business, commerce, entertainment and the density of traffic," said Laura Pomerantz, principal at PBS Real Estate. "The foot traffic is staggering."

The lease on the 3,200-square-foot shop, on the south side of 42nd Street between Sixth Avenue and Broadway, runs through January, at which point executives will decide whether a store all about toaster pastries makes long-term sense.

The focal point of the store, which opens Tuesday, is the cafe. It will serve about 30 snacks and desserts.

The menu includes the Fluffer Butter, marshmallow spread sandwiched between two Pop-Tarts frosted fudge pastries; the Sticky Cinna Munchies, cinnamon rolls topped with cream-cheese icing and chunks of Pop-Tarts cinnamon-roll variety; and Ants on a Log?, which is celery, peanut butter and chunks of the Wild Grape version.



And then there's the Pop-Tarts Sushi, three kinds of Pop-Tarts minced and then wrapped in a fruit roll-up. "We did an internal tasting here at the building, and it was the winner," said Etienne Patout, senior director at the Pop-Tarts brand, part of the Kellogg Company.

Visitors can also build their own Pop-Tarts, starting with a basic pastry and asking servers to add frosting, toppings (coconut, sprinkles) and drizzle (caramel, raspberry). They can take their pastries frozen, toasted, microwaved or uncooked, but there will be no self-serve.

"The D.I.Y. thing, just because of handling food, is not something we're going to offer," Mr. Patout said.

There is also a Varietizer, a custom-built vending machine that carries about 23 of the regular Pop-Tart flavors (seasonal offerings, like pumpkin and gingerbread, are excluded for now). Customers use a touch screen to select six two-packs of the tarts for \$12, assembling their own variety packs.

The store will put on a brief light show every hour. First, visitors will "get frosted," Mr. Schoessel said, with a red light and a white light. That will be followed by brief pulses of light, "all different colors to mimic the sprinkles," he said, "then another really bright light" to evoke wrapping the tarts in foil.

Computer screens in a row at the side of the store provide access to PopTartsWorld.com, social media sites and Pop-Tarts video games, similar to Memory but with pastry icons. Consumers can also buy merchandise, and design their own shirt.

Kellogg's said Pop-Tarts had been a strong performer in the most recent quarter, but its net sales were smaller than those of M&M's and Hershey. In the last year, Kellogg's sold \$481 million worth of Pop-Tarts in mass United States stores (excluding Wal-Mart), according to market-research firm SymphonyIRI Group. Hershey sold \$1.07 billion worth of candy, while M&M's sold \$753 million.

"Our long-term hope is to strengthen the bonding between the brand and the consumer, and that has great benefits for the brand," Mr. Patout said.

Pop-Tarts were introduced by Kellogg's in 1964 to compete with a similar product from Post called Country Squares. The Kellogg's version took off, in part because of its name, which reflected the growing Pop Art movement.

Just a presence in Times Square can help a company, said Richard Demb, a co-founder of Dale and Thomas Popcorn, which had a Times Square shop in the mid-2000s.

“It was a way to project an image of growth and maturity,” said Mr. Demb, who left Dale and Thomas and is now co-founder of AbesMarket.com. “Rent is, obviously, more than it is in most other places, but there are opportunities in Times Square that you would not find anywhere else.”

Times Square is expensive real estate — between 44th and 46th streets, the rent is around \$1,000 per square foot, said Ms. Pomerantz of PBS Real Estate, while it drops to \$400 or so per square foot at 42nd street and south.

“The billboards cost as much as the retail space,” said Faith Hope Consolo, chairwoman of the retail leasing and sales division at Prudential Douglas Elliman. “When Hershey’s first went into Times Square, they had a store that was about 150 feet, but they had a 100-foot sign. They wanted a billboard.”

There is no 100-foot sign, but Pop-Tarts is wrapping its 50-foot storefront in Pop-Tarts branding, and taking over the six-story billboard above the store. “It gives them a visibility that they can’t get anywhere else,” Ms. Consolo said.