

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

## Something Weird Is Happening with Halloween Chocolate

*Where did it all go?*

Source: Yasmin Tayag, *The Atlantic*, October 8, 2025

My first thought upon seeing the Halloween-candy display at my local CVS last week was: *Ooh, new treats!* Then a second thought barged in: These new treats seemed awfully light on the chocolate. The Hershey's Nuggets contained a pumpkin-spice-latte cream. The M&M's were filled with, from what I could tell, berry-flavored peanut butter. And the Ghost Toast Kit Kats were covered not in chocolate, but in a fawn-colored cinnamon coating.

Candy manufacturers release new versions of old sweets all the time, but the timing of these decidedly un-chocolaty varieties is curious: They've all launched within the past two years, as the world supply of cocoa beans has dwindled, causing prices to skyrocket. Making cheap chocolate treats is no longer a cheap endeavor—unless they contain less chocolate.

Novelty is core to the candy business. It is especially important to Gen Z and Millennial consumers—the most candy-hungry demographic in recent years. This group seeks out taste mash-ups, unexpected textures, and flavor “experiences,” Carly Schildhaus, the communications director of the National Confectioners Association, an industry group, told me. Nostalgia is trending too: Sweets from the 1990s, such as Gushers and Nerds, are having a moment, as are childhood flavors such as PB&J. Plus, even before the cocoa crisis, plenty of mass-market chocolate candies contained add-ins. Mixing in more, or different ones, gives the impression of innovation, not cost cutting. For example, the vibe of M&M's upcoming Bakery Collection—which includes such flavors as cherry chocolate cupcake, lemon meringue pie, and peanut-butter cinnamon roll—is fun, not frugal.

But candy-industry insiders know that the pressures for companies are twofold. Less chocolaty candies are “certainly a response to cocoa prices,” Nicko Debenham, a cocoa-industry expert and the former head of sustainability at the chocolate giant Barry Callebaut, told me. Since 2023, West Africa, where most of the world's cocoa is grown, has had consecutive below-average harvests, owing to bad weather, crop disease, and illegal gold mining on farmland. A global shortage ensued, and the price of cocoa fluctuated wildly, reaching a record high of more than \$12,000 a ton last December (in recent history, prices stayed below \$4,000 a ton). Cocoa prices have become so volatile that banking on chocolate-based products is now a huge risk for candy makers. Companies are being forced to acknowledge that the cocoa crisis is a long-term threat, Ignacio Canals Polo, a chocolate-industry equity analyst with Bloomberg Intelligence, told me. “Three weeks of bad weather can completely change the dynamics of the market,” he said. “If you're a chocolate manufacturer, you have to adjust your portfolio.” (None of the candy companies I reached out to for this article returned my request for comment.)

“Cocoa cutting,” as one might call it, has turned some sweets into (literally) paler imitations of their former selves. This year, Hershey's rolled out a chocolate-free Cinnamon Toast Crunch version of its classic Kisses; last year, it launched Reese's Werewolf Tracks, which replaced half the chocolate

coating with a vanilla cream. Ferrero’s newest versions of Butterfinger bars swap the milk-chocolate coating for salted caramel or marshmallow cream. Last year, Hershey’s released a white Kit Kat enveloped in vanilla-flavored cream. Non-chocolate versions of these treats have been sold before, of course, but their sheer prevalence in the midst of a cocoa crisis is notable.

Observant consumers have noticed another ploy to use less chocolate: smaller candies. Standard Reese’s cups, for example, come in a package of two that weighs 1.5 ounces, but Reese’s Peanut Butter Pumpkins, which are typically sold during Halloween but launched this year in July, are sold in individually wrapped, 1.2-ounce servings. Bags of newly launched Kit Kat Counts, a vampire-shaped reimagining of the chocolate-coated wafers, are more than an ounce lighter than bags of their snack-size counterparts. (Last year, even former President Joe Biden complained that Snickers bars had undergone shrinkflation. Mars denied the allegations.)

Should the chocolate crisis worsen, candy companies have an especially springy cushion to fall back on: Gummies—shaped like bears, worms, NBA stars—are growing in popularity, as are other chewy, fruit-flavored candies. Most of the candy giants have thrust these alternatives into the spotlight. Hershey’s latest Halloween lineup includes Shaq-a-Licious XL Gummies, which were launched last year, and new Jolly Ranchers Trickies, gummies with intentionally mismatched colors, shapes, and flavors (a pink cherry gummy may, for example, taste of green apple). The Ferrara Candy Company just released a juice-filled iteration of its ultra-popular Nerds Gummy Clusters. Mars, meanwhile, is pushing Halloween variety packs that include Starburst, Skittles, Life Savers, and Hubba Bubba. Freed from the cocoa supply chain, and with a seemingly limitless range of synthetic flavors to choose from, fruity candies are an ideal vector for novelty. (Among Mondelez’s new offerings this year are Sour Patch Kids that, uh, glow under black light.)

Although next year’s cocoa harvest is looking up, its fate remains uncertain. The current price of cocoa is still more than twice as high as it was in 2022. Still, the future of American candy consumption seems fairly stable. People tend to buy chocolate even when prices fluctuate, Canals Polo said. More pertinently, most trick-or-treaters (and, in some cases, their parents) expect not chocolate specifically, but *candy*—lots of it, and the more variety, the better. The pastel-green, marshmallow-flavored Witch’s Brew Kit Kats for sale at my CVS initially struck me as an unnecessary addition to the world’s confectionery lineup, but it seemed unfair to rob my 2-year-old of a core Halloween experience: eating dumb, fun sweets. They were not great, and certainly not chocolate, but that didn’t stop me from gobbling them down too.

### **Possible Response Questions**

- What are your thoughts about “cocoa cutting”? Explain.
- Did something in the article surprise you? Discuss.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a “move” made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.