

The dentist who invented candy floss

From the sweeties.net wiki

Candy floss is about as sugary as a sweet can be: spun sugar and very little else. So it is a pleasing irony that the machine which spins it was invented by a dentist.

Spun sugar before the machine

People were spinning sugar by hand long before machines. In the 19th century spun sugar was made in Europe, but it was expensive and took a great deal of work, so ordinary people rarely had it. Some accounts trace spun sugar in Italy back as far as the 15th century.

Dr Morrison's machine

William James Morrison was a dentist from Nashville, Tennessee, born in 1860, and a keen inventor with a number of inventions to his name. In 1897, working with a confectioner, John C. Wharton, he developed an electric machine that melted sugar and then used air to force it through a wire screen, where it cooled into fine threads.

It was called Fairy Floss, and it was introduced to a wide audience at the 1904 World's Fair in St Louis, with great success: 68,655 boxes were sold at 25 cents a box. Before the fair opened, a visitor described watching the new sweet being spun by electricity and said it looked like the pink cotton wool used to pack Christmas jewellery.

A second dentist, and a new name

Morrison was not the only dentist in the story. In 1921 Joseph Lascaux, a dentist from New Orleans, invented a similar machine, and his patent called the sweet cotton candy. That name eventually took over in the United States. Others also claimed to have invented the machine, including Thomas Patton.

The machine used today goes back to another patent, filed in 1905 by Albert D. Robinson of Lynn, Massachusetts, whose design had a motor driven spinning bowl. By 1907 he had transferred the rights to the General Electric Company.

Candy floss, fairy floss, cotton candy

The sweet has different names in different places. In Britain, Ireland, India, New Zealand and South Africa it is candy floss. In Australia it is still fairy floss, the name Morrison and Wharton gave it. In the United States it is cotton candy.

How it is made

A candy floss machine has a spinning head with a small bowl in the middle. Sugar poured into the bowl is melted by heaters near the rim and flung out through tiny holes. It hardens in the air into threads, which build up in the big bowl around the head until the operator twirls a stick or cone round the edge to gather them up. Modern machines spin at 3,450 revolutions a minute. Candy floss is sensitive to damp, which is why it can turn sticky on a humid day. See [how is candy floss made?](#)

A modern scare

In February 2024 the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and the territory of Puducherry banned candy floss after laboratory tests found rhodamine B, a dye linked to cancer, in samples. Rhodamine B is not allowed as a food dye in Europe or California.

So what about the teeth?

A dentist inventing candy floss sounds like a joke about finding new patients. Morrison, who died in 1926, is best remembered for the machine. Candy floss is almost pure sugar, so the usual advice applies: enjoy it as a treat, and brush your teeth.

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