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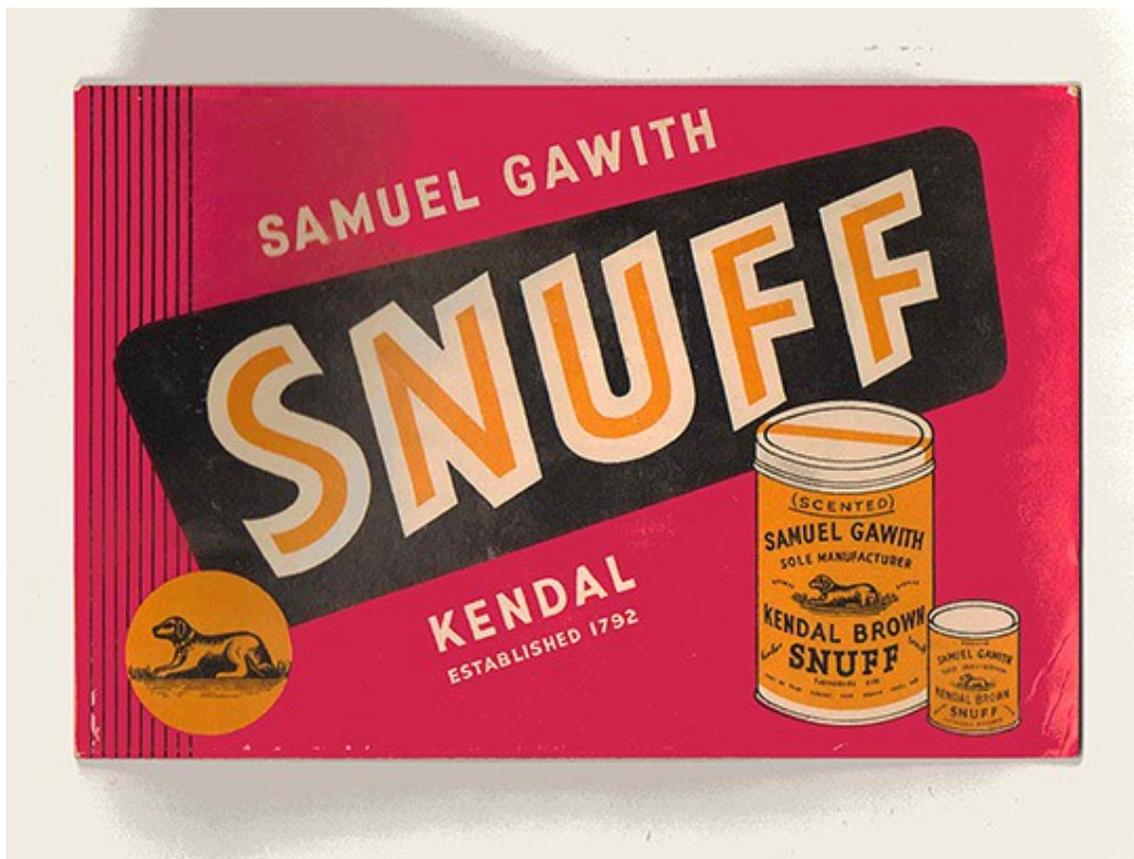
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SNUFF: ALL THE COOL 18TH CENTURY KIDS ARE DOING IT



The law of unintended consequences strikes again. “Snuff is becoming more popular because of the smoking bans all over the world,” says Bob Gregory, GM of snuff makers Samuel Gawith & Co., founded in 1792.

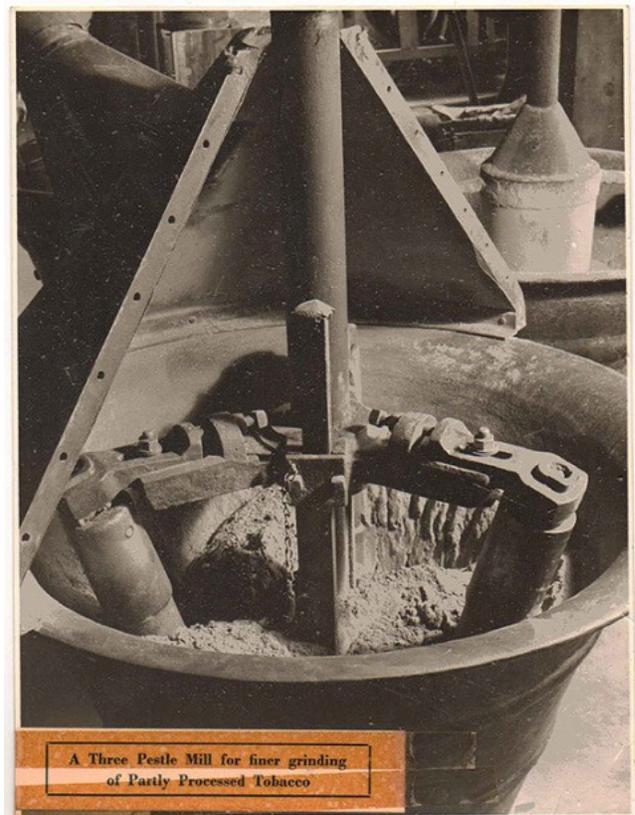
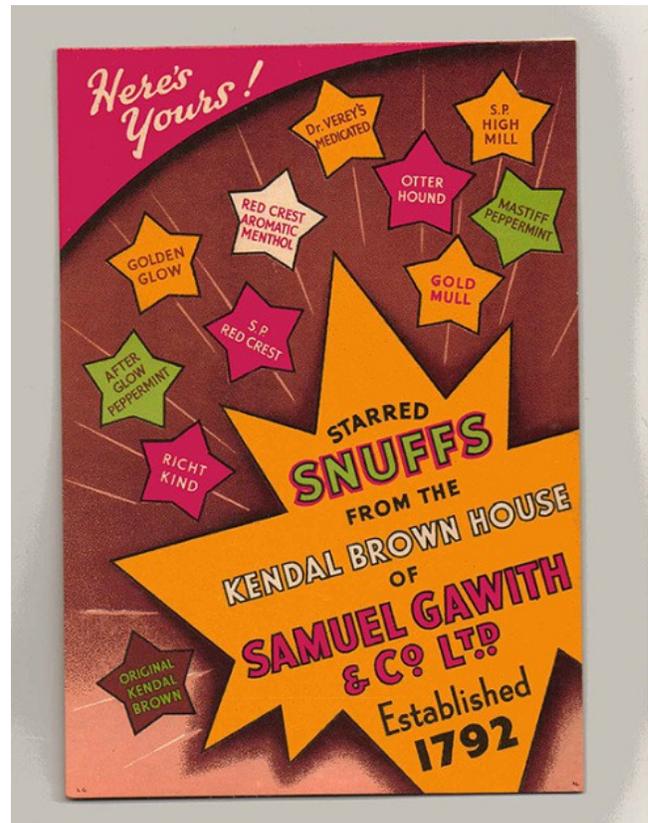
You may, however, never actually see someone sniffing it – we’re talking nasal snuff here: “Snuff-taking is a bit of a dark secret – the number of people who take snuff but won’t admit to it is amazing, it’s a sort of secret society,” says Bob. In spite of that we know that Stephen Fry is a snuffer, and rather bizarrely it’s rumoured Princess Diana was. More predictably Philip K. Dick was in the habit. Now that’s a dinner party I’d like to have given.

As you enter Samuel Gawith's mill in Kendal, in England's Lake District, the scents infused into the building's fabric envelop you. I loathe cigarette smoke, but love the smell of tobacco. The oily, dark, rich aromas here are extraordinary, instantly permeating my clothing – but in a good way.

Using snuff seems so very 18th century: George Washington and Ben Franklin were aficionados; Mozart's rapid writing of Don Giovanni was partly fuelled by the product; Napoleon purchased 7lb a month – no wonder he was hyper. In Bob's factory even the snuff-grinding machinery is 18th century – dated to 1750, the canny founders buying it second-hand. It's thought to be the oldest production machinery still in regular use anywhere in the world. Originally the giant cogs and pestles processed gunpowder, some maybe fired in anger against the American Revolutionaries – sorry about that, don't know what we were thinking.

The habit has already witnessed several evolutions: "In the 18th century it was a luxury item for gentlemen; then became popular with miners to help keep their nasal passages free of dust," says online tobacconist Simon Jackson, "Here in the UK it's mainly men in their 50s and onwards who buy it. In Germany though [where there are about a million users] it is fashionable for those in their 20s and 30s."

Health experts argue about possible problems. It's certainly addictive, and is unlikely to be better for you than abstinence; but little or no link with cancer is evident, and some promote it as a replacement for cigarettes – no tar, no carbon monoxide, same nicotine hit. And there are far more dangerous things snorted. The intriguing words of a medico from the 18th century bear repetition here: Nicholas Andry de Boisregard wrote that those indulging in too much tobacco suffer "a withering of their noble parts."



It's not just the freedom to use it in bars that may appeal to new users. Men like stuff. Snuff taking has its own paraphernalia: elegant little boxes if the shiny tins are not enough; brightly-colored cotton handkerchiefs, four square feet of cloth to catch the sneezes (and less pleasantly, ejected brown snuff); a vast range of flavours and styles to argue about – Gawith's offer different degrees of fineness and moisture content; fruit flavours and scented oddities like Grousemoor and Otterhound; menthol versions of varying strength...

Then there's the ritual. Tap the tin and open its lid. Take a pinch of snuff between thumb and forefinger. Shove that directly up the nostril and inhale; or put the powder on the back of the hand, or 'the anatomical snuff-box' – looking at the back of the hand stretch your thumb and index-finger apart to create a little pocket in the flap of flesh between them. Some advocate small quantities inhaled slowly. Others man up with clumps of the stuff snorted rapidly. Fodder for a million bar-stool debates.

When you think about it we have already had the revival of the coffee-house, that other great Georgian institution. I look forward to writing about wig-powdering soon. It could happen.

