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Make A Face, Alpine Man, and Dumbo: Dispatch from a PEZ Convention

To the uninitiated, a trip to the Northeast PEZ Collectors Gathering (aka NE PEZCon) can be overwhelming. A kaleidoscope of color overtakes the modest banquet hall at the Sheraton Hotel in Stamford, Connecticut, where thousands of PEZ dispensers are on display, tucked safely behind plexiglass, artfully arranged on custom-made shelving, or spread across white tablecloths. There are PEZ racks and PEZ pins; PEZ standees and PEZ accessories. Cheap, unwrapped dispensers crowd Rubbermaid bins: 50 cents a pop, or fill a bag for 8 bucks. Attendees and dealers sport PEZ clothing, and overheard conversations sound like secret code: “Is that a 2.6 or a 3.4?” “Who was looking for an Alpine Man?”

Connecticut is PEZ country. In the town of Orange, you can stop by the PEZ Visitor’s Center, which opened in 2011 and is attached to the company’s North American manufacturing and distribution center (built in 1973). This is the only official PEZ plant outside of Austria, so it’s understandable that something like NE PEZCon—now in its 21st year—exists. The event draws a couple hundred, and when I arrive on Saturday morning, after passing through an unassuming hotel lobby and paying my five dollar entry fee, I’m one of about 40 shoppers. To a green PEZhead like me, the Stamford gathering is plenty large, yet every July, Cleveland hosts what I’ve been told is the “Super Bowl of PEZ,” with at least twice the number of dealers that Connecticut draws. In fact, if you walk around NE PEZCon, you constantly hear stories of Cleveland.

“All the Japanese and European dealers show up in Cleveland,” one vendor tells me, his eyebrows raised. “There’s more room hopping there, too.” I smile and pretend I understand the ramifications of these revelations, but I’m lost until he explains that this means people open their rooms up for PEZ trades and swaps.

I am a novice collector, at best. My childhood was spent amassing dispensers from grocery stores, but once I graduated high school and left for college in the late 90s, my interest waned. It wasn’t until the past few years that I’ve returned to the PEZ fold, mostly because my wife and I bought our first house and my parents were keen to rid theirs of my old knickknacks. The majority of these toys reside in my basement, but the PEZ collection—six 30-quart containers packed to the brim—sits in my office. I now have a cabinet with some of my dispensers on display. I regularly scan eBay for good PEZ deals. I travel across the state to attend PEZ conventions (today is my second NE PEZCon).

Perhaps this is my midlife crisis?

I don’t know exactly how many dispensers I own, to be honest. 350 is a conservative estimate, though I wouldn’t venture to guess over 500. I once took inventory using a PEZ collector’s guide (bought at my last NE PEZCon), but I never added up the little checkmarks. And while 350-500 PEZ dispensers is a decent collection, most of what I own isn’t valuable. The 1990s was a decade of “collectibles,” and PEZ dispensers from this era were mass-produced at such a rate that, like comic books, Beanie Babies, and other must-haves from my childhood, they never became difficult to find. (The Tweety Bird dispenser that appeared on *Seinfeld* didn’t tamp down popularity, either.) As such, for example, a sealed, perfect condition Ninja Turtle dispenser is probably worth about \$3 today. Hardcore PEZ collectors know that valuable dispensers are older, manufactured back before the company began adding “feet” to the bottom of the units. (A

note: This is not to say that dispensers with feet—little rounded tabs that help the dispenser stand upright—are worthless, but that the big money items were generally produced well before the introduction of feet in 1987.)

My NE PEZCon goal is to purchase a Captain Hook dispenser, which was launched in 1969 and is long retired. Depending on condition and patent number (lower patent numbers often mean older dispensers, though that isn't always the case...PEZ can be complicated), this particular item sells for anywhere between \$30 and \$55. The Hook dispenser has a great face, with a snarl for an expression. That's one reason why I want to get my hands on one. The other: as a kid, I bought a Captain Hook mask and wore it for several Halloweens, including one where I dressed as a PEZ dispenser.

I see Captain Hook priced at \$39, \$40, and \$80. This last one must have some special feature I'm unaware of. Fearing embarrassment, I don't ask. Instead, I walk around the room five times, telling myself all of the other things I can buy for \$40. I spend some time looking at tables of Funko POP! figures, which have been added to the convention roster this year, and grow disappointed that the NE PEZCon has included them. I ask myself: Maybe PEZ doesn't draw a big enough crowd anymore? Will anyone care about Funko in five years? What groceries can I buy for \$40? To my left, a dealer's young daughter explains to a woman why one Miss Piggy dispenser is more valuable than another (it has to do with eyelashes).

The most expensive PEZ dispenser I see on display while I wander is an ultra rare prototype Dumbo for \$5500. It has a soft rubber head, as opposed to the more common hard plastic, and there are only a few of these prototypes thought to exist. It is a beauty of a dispenser. I snap a photo of it, because it's like going to MoMA to see "The Starry Night," only it's much smaller, and features the face of a Disney character. Nobody will buy this dispenser today. It's

here to grab attention. But that doesn't mean big money isn't changing hands at these conventions. The last time I was here, a vendor told me she was in the middle of a transaction to acquire a PEZ Make A Face for a few thousand dollars. The kits, kind of a PEZ version of Mr. Potato Head, were only sold for a brief period in the 1970s and were pulled from production after safety complaints. At this year's convention, I see one Make A Face on a table, a complete version, for \$2800. I snap a photo. Another Picasso.

Still debating myself, I spend a few minutes chatting with a woman dressed as a 1950s PEZ girl. Some history: Though people today associate PEZ with toy dispensers, these didn't exist until 1949, when they were unveiled at the Vienna Trade Fair. When PEZ first introduced dispensers, they looked like cigarette lighters (known as "Regulars," with the motto, "No Smoking, PEZing Allowed") and were marketed to adults. As an advertising ploy, the PEZ girl, a pinup dressed in a short, form fitting navy blue bodice and a circle skirt, with the word "PEZ" in large letters stitched across the chest, appeared in ads. The woman today, wearing a similar dress and a dark blue pillbox PEZ hat, poses for pictures with fellow PEZheads, but I'm drawn to the table she shares with her partner because she's selling handmade miniature PEZ girl dresses for Barbie dolls. The tiny craftsmanship is incredible.

In the end, I do purchase a Captain Hook, though I chastise myself for spending \$40 on a 4" piece of plastic. It has a low patent number, and though the paint isn't perfect, I like its appearance. As I walk with the dispenser, ensconced in bubble wrap, in my hand, a bickering couple to my right debate in heated voices whether or not they already have a particular dispenser. "Can't you check your list?" the wife asks. Ten minutes later, I watch a potential buyer argue with a dealer regarding the color of an alligator head: "It's not a blend of two greens, it's faded from the sun!" (A note: this particular dispenser goes for about \$100.) But the general

vibe of PEZCon is one of joy. There's an innocence to the entire affair, despite the commerce, and parents with their kids move from table to table with visible amusement. Same with couples: young and old, gay or straight. PEZ welcomes all. After selling a rather inexpensive dispenser to a little girl no older than eight, one dealer turns to a different customer and says she's happy to see kids starting their own collections. "It's a healthy thing," she says, "not like all those other things kids like today."

After two hours, my senses are overloaded, and I decide it's time to head home. Before I leave, though, I buy a limited run charity dispenser to sponsor the Relay for Life. The man selling them also prints a charity PEZ calendar, with PEZ faces photoshopped onto Mount Rushmore and other fun spoofs. I ask him if he's friendly with the other dealers. "I've known some of these people for decades," he answers, and I get the sense that he tells me this as proof of a tightknit community. I can see what he means as I take one more stroll around the hall. One dealer points to a photo and says he took it at the home of someone stationed across the room. An older woman smiles and says, "You've grown up" when a college-aged attendee approaches her table. These people know each other. They're part of a strange little club, but that's life, isn't it? We're all fans of something, be it movie stars, sports franchises, or tiny plastic candy dispensers.

Maybe I'll take a trip to Cleveland, I tell myself as I tuck my new additions in my coat pocket, grab a complementary roll of PEZ candy at the door, and return to the real world. Maybe I'll put more dispensers out on display at home. Maybe I'll come across a vintage dispenser at a yard sale and become a thing of legend. I look up. The sky is dark. The sun is trying to make an appearance.