NIQ
Perspectives
Food & Beverage

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Luxury chocolate is defying the rules

“Step back for a moment from FMCG and think about luxury brands more generally. These brands don’t just launch a constant stream of new items in hopes they’ll take off. These brands are meticulously curating and planning drops–limited runs, disciplined distribution, and powerful marketing campaigns that leave potential buyers saying, “I need this!” Brands need to focus on converting the excitement these drops generate into repeat. Dubai chocolate is a perfect example–it’s premium, it’s attention grabbing, but it’s so last season. What’s next?”

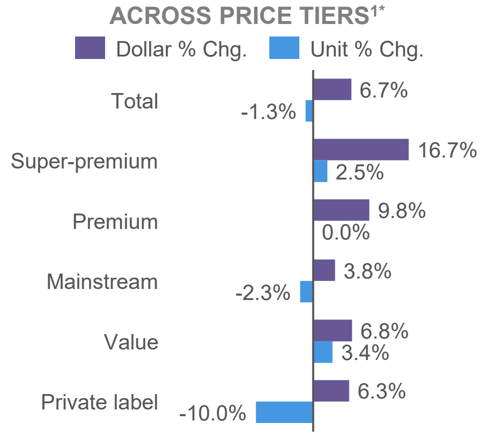
Chris Costagli
Vice President, Thought Leadership F&B Insights Lead, NielsenIQ

Implications for chocolate manufacturers

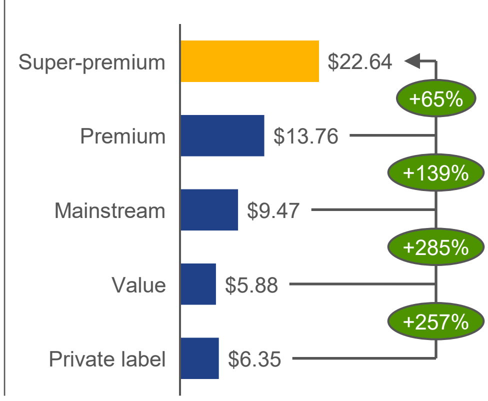
In the quest for value, super-premium chocolate is rewiring the category

Super-premium chocolate, which accounts for 10.6% share is growing both dollars and units–a rare combination in a price-pressured category. Mainstream chocolate is the category leader, driving 54.6% of dollar sales, and while the mainstream tier is growing in dollars, unit sales fell which indicates price is sustaining the tier. “More chocolate” isn’t the future. It’s fewer, higher-stakes purchases with brands that justify the premium.

CHOCOLATE SALES PERFORMANCE ACROSS PRICE TIERS[1*]



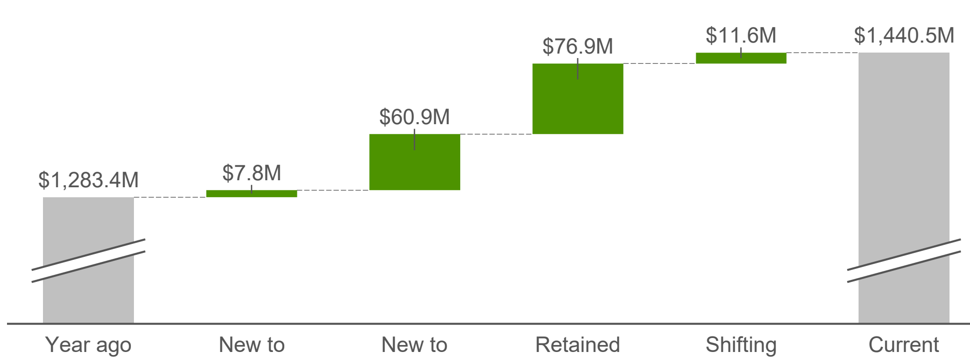
PRICE PER VOLUME ACROSS CHOCOLATE PRICE TIERS[1*]



The chocolate category is polarizing

Super-premium chocolate didn’t grow in isolation, it won $11.6M from other price tiers within the category, and $7.7M (62.1%) came directly from mainstream chocolate^. While only 7% of super-premium chocolate growth was sourced from within the category, it does indicate that other price tiers are susceptible to luxury chocolate and need to work harder to hold onto buyers because a simple price-play is not enough.^

SUPER-PREMIUM CHOCOLATE DOLLAR SALES GROWTH DRIVERS[2^]



Did you know…

- Gen Z is **1.4x more likely** to associate products with health or functional benefits as premium options[3]
- Asian/Pacific Islander chocolate buyers are most-loyal to super-premium brands, **21% of category trips and 20% of category dollars** go to super-premium brands[2]
- **82% of shoppers** are interested in “value-first” versions of premium products, that have the same quality and characteristics but with simpler packaging or format[3]

Industry Analysis Sources: [1]NIQ, Retail Measurement Services, Total US Full View, 52-Weeks Ending 12/27/2025; [2]NIQ, Expanded Omnishopper Panel On Demand, Total US, Total Outlets, 52-Weeks Ending 12/27/2025; [3]NIQ, BASES Quick Question Omnibus Survey, n=1,025, October 2025

Notes: *Price tiers defined using the chocolate category at level brand low such that super-premium ≥1.75, premium ≥1.25, mainstream ≥0.75, value = all other name brands, private label = all private label; ^Price tiers defined using the top ~70% by dollar sales of brand low contributors in each price tier such that super-premium ≥1.75, premium ≥1.25, mainstream ≥0.75, value = all other name brands, private label = all private label

Author: Chris Costagli, Vice President, Thought Leadership, Food & Beverage Insights Lead; Drew Fulton, Associate Client Director, Insights

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The takeaway…

- Execution is unforgiving, with an average of only four chances to convert shoppers a year–one bad placement, one out-of-stock, one confusing message could cost your super-premium brand the entire year
- Trial can masquerade as momentum; viral innovation can ignite trial and spike share, but the real challenge is driving repeat as copycat brands flood the market
- Super-premium chocolate has become the entry point to the category, with more claims and a wider assortment of claims, the category's bar is set high for other price tiers to entice new category entrants

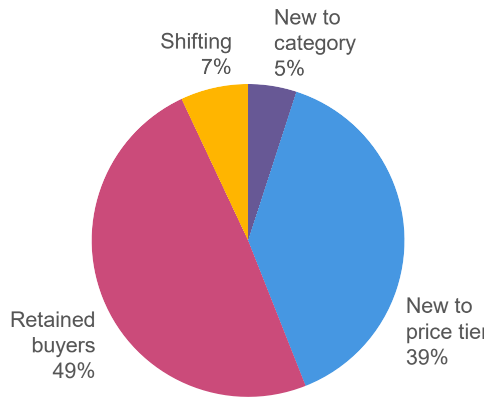
Your next move…

- Engineer the "four super-premium moments" with calendar discipline: seasonal events, gifting peaks, and self-care triggers that each have distinctive assortments and displays
- Treat virality as a spark with a system operating behind the trend: controlled drops, quality consistency, and a portfolio path that migrates trial buyers into loyalty portfolio repeaters
- Be ruthless about copycat clutter by actively curating the shelf to protect differentiation and avoid an aisle of one-time tries

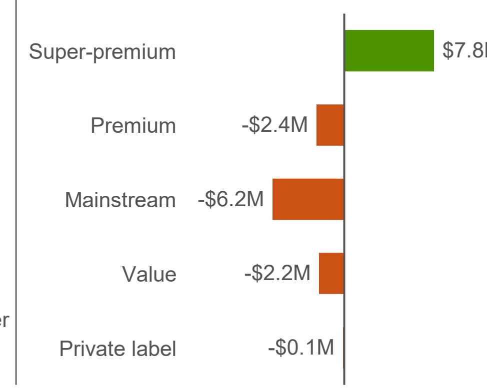
Super-premium chocolate is the category recruiter

Shifting contributed to super-premium chocolate growth, but the bigger story is who stayed and who showed up. Retained super-premium buyers drove 49% of growth but new-to-tier buyers added $60.9M in sales. Even more telling is that super-premium was the only price tier that brought new buyers into the overall chocolate category. Super-premium chocolate is becoming an on-ramp to the category, not just an upgrade.

SUPER-PREMIUM CHOCOLATE SHARE OF DOLLAR GROWTH[2^]



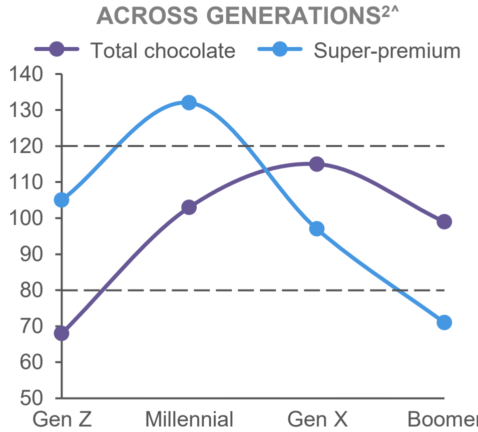
NEW CHOCOLATE CATEGORY BUYER DOLLAR CONTRIBUTION[2^]



Chocolate's luxury buyer is younger

Super-premium chocolate is resonating with Millennial consumers. Innovations like Dubai chocolate may have contributed to this; however, even a year ago when Dubai chocolate was in its infancy in the US market, Millennials over-indexed in the super-premium segment. Millennials make 1.2x more trips for super-premium chocolate each year making them a valuable shopper for luxury brands to target with new high-end innovation.

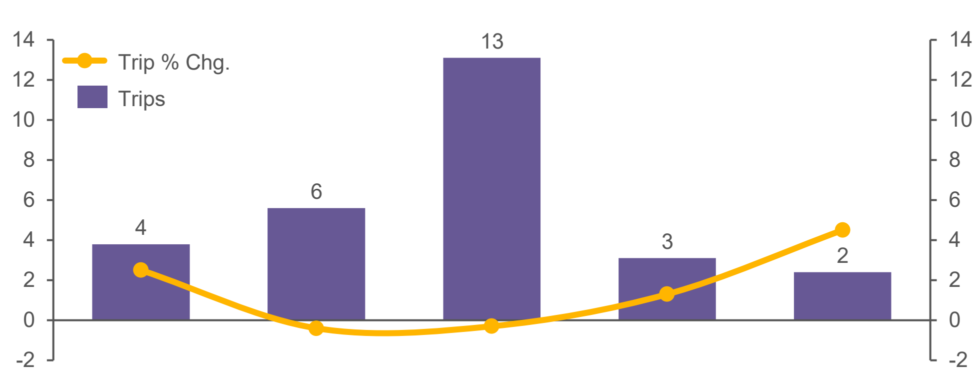
VALUE SALES INDEX, ACROSS GENERATIONS[2^]



Luxury brands get four chances a year

Super-premium chocolate now reaches 52% of US households, up +1.9 points year over year – but access is not the advantage, opportunity density is. Shoppers make just four super-premium chocolate trips annually, compared to 13 trips for mainstream. Super-premium growth hinges less on awareness and more on precision – winning the right shopper, at the right retailer, in the right moment.

CHOCOLATE PRICE TIER TRIPS PER BUYER[2^]



Questions?

Chris Costagli
VP, F&B Thought Leadership
Chris.Costagli@NielsenIQ.com

The future of chocolate is about a luxury experience, not just treats. Super-premium chocolate is already delivering growth at a high price point which means the next frontier of growth isn't just a higher price. Brands need to be focused on frequency and retention. The industry is going to chase the next viral flavor, but the real advantage will come from engineering loyalty. Brands that win in super-premium are going to look a lot less like candy companies and a lot more like portfolio houses – curating drops, controlling distribution, and building a repeat engine that outlives trends.

Industry Analysis Sources: [1]NIQ, Retail Measurement Services, Total US Full View, 52-Weeks Ending 12/27/2025; [2]NIQ, Expanded Omnishopper Panel On Demand, Total US, Total Outlets, 52-Weeks Ending 12/27/2025; [3]NIQ, BASES Quick Question Omnibus Survey, n=1,025, October 2025

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