

Bunnies to the rescue as virus hits Belgian chocolatiers



In this photo taken on Wednesday, April 8, 2020, chocolate rabbits with face masks are lined up at the Coccoatree chocolate shop in Lonze, Belgium. As all non-essential shops in Belgium have been closed due to the outbreak of COVID-19, many chocolatiers have had to resort to online sales, home delivery or pick up on site. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (Virginia Mayo/Associated Press)

By **Raf Casert** | AP

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SINT-PIETERS BRUGGE, Belgium — Master chocolatier Dominique Persoone stood forlorn on his huge workfloor, a faint smell of cocoa lingering amid the idle machinery — in a mere memory of better times.

Easter Sunday is normally the most important date on the chocolate makers’ calendar. But the coronavirus pandemic, with its lockdowns and social distancing, has struck a hard blow to the 5-billion-euro (\$5.5-billion) industry that’s one of Belgium’s most emblematic.

“It’s going to be a disaster,” Persoone told The Associated Press through a medical mask. He closed his shops as a precautionary measure weeks ago, and says “a lot” of Belgium’s hundreds of chocolate-makers, from multinationals to village outlets, will face financial ruin.

For the coronavirus to hit is one thing, but to do it at Easter — when chocolate bunnies and eggs are seemingly everywhere — doubles the damage.



Yet amid the general gloom Belgians are allowing themselves some levity for the long Easter weekend.

Some producers, like Persoone’s famed The Chocolate Line, offer Easter eggs or bunnies in medical masks, while the country’s top virologist has jokingly granted a lockdown pass to the “essential” furry workers traditionally supposed to bring kids their Easter eggs.

For young and old here, Easter Sunday usually means egg hunts in gardens and parks, sticky brown fingers, the satisfying crack of an amputated chocolate rabbit’s ear before it disappears into a rapt child’s mouth.

“People love their chocolates, the Easter eggs, the filled eggs, the little figures we make,” said chocolatier Marleen Van Volsem in her Praleen shop in Halle, south of Brussels. “This is really something very big for us.”



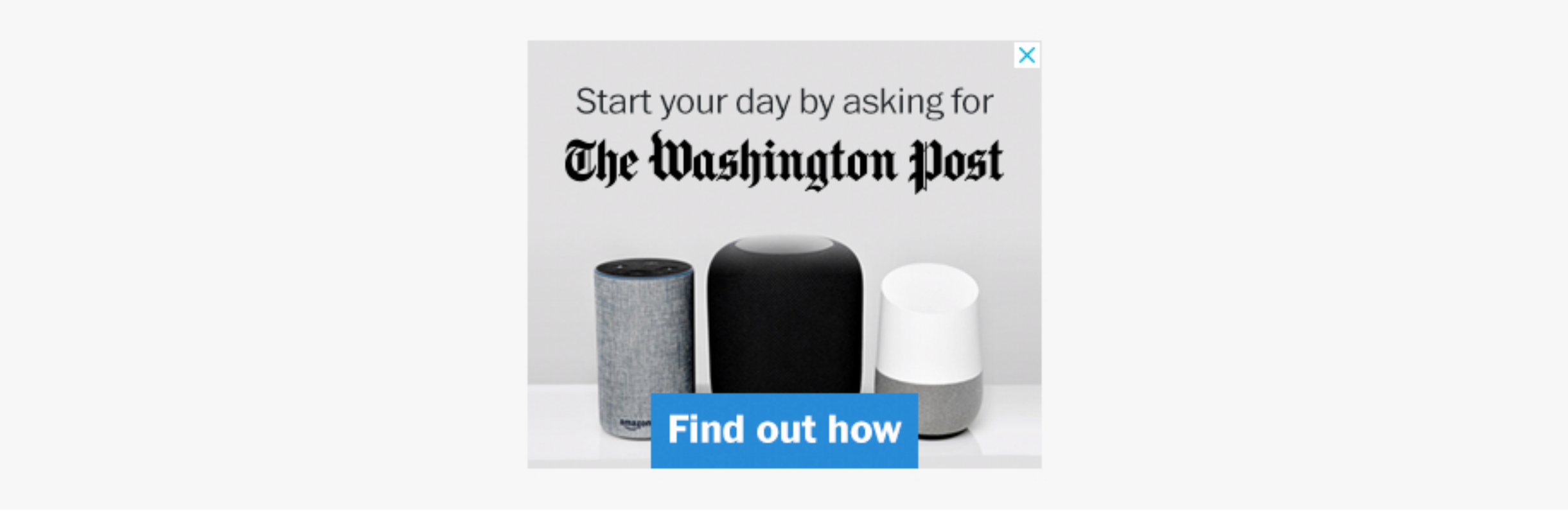
The country has an annual per capita chocolate consumption of six kilograms (over 13 pounds), much of it scoffed during the peak Easter period.

“It is a really big season because if we don’t have this, then we won’t ... be OK for the year,” Van Volsem said.

Persoone makes about 20% of his annual turnover in the single Easter week. This year, reduced to web sales and pick-ups out of his facility in western Belgium while his luxury shops in tourist cities Bruges and Antwerp are closed? “2% maybe, if we are lucky — not even.”

Guy Gallet, chief of Belgium’s chocolate federation, expects earnings to be greatly reduced across the board this year.

He said companies that sell mainly through supermarkets are doing relatively well but firms depending on sales in tourist locations, restaurants or airport shops “are badly hit.”



Persoone has a firm local base of customers but knows how tourists affect the books of so many chocolatiers.

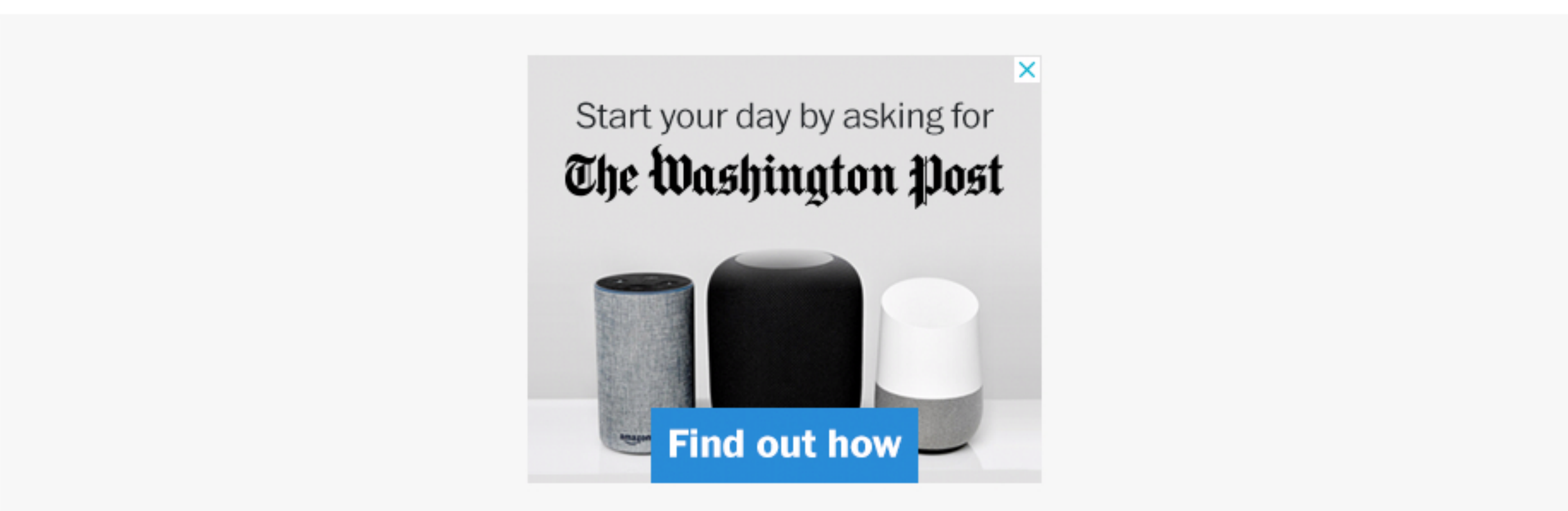
“Of course, we won’t see Japanese people or Americans who come to Belgium for a holiday,” he said. “I am afraid if we do not get tourists anymore it will be a disaster, even in the future.”

For most people, the coronavirus causes mild to moderate symptoms such as fever and cough. But for some, especially older adults and the infirm, it can cause pneumonia and in some cases death.

The immediate challenge is to keep the Easter spirit — and the chocolatiers’ craft — alive in these trying times.

A big part is humor and the use of medical masks made of white chocolate is an obvious one. Persoone puts them on eggs.

“It is laughing with a hard thing. And on the other hand, we still have to keep fun, no? It is important to laugh in life.”

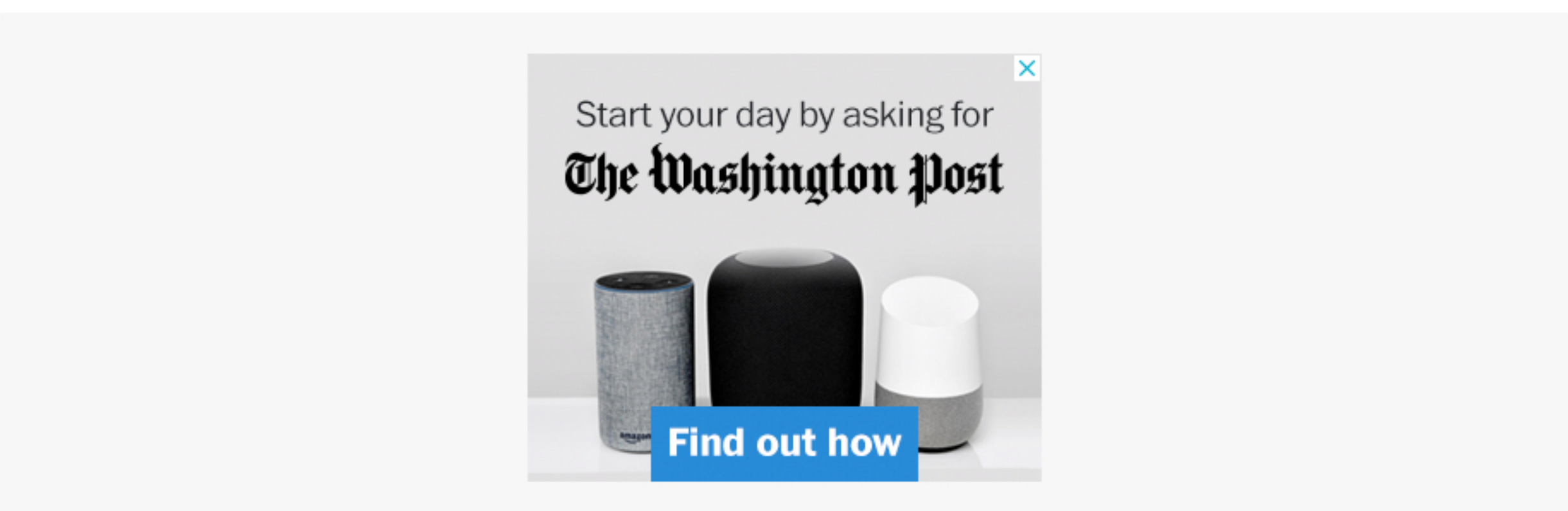


Genevieve Trepant of the Coccoatree chocolate shop in Lonze, southeast of Brussels, couldn’t agree more. And like Persoone, who donated sanitary gel no longer needed in his factory to a local hospital, Trepant also thought of the needy.

That’s how the Lapinou Solidaire and its partner the Lapinou Confine — the Caring Bunny and the Quarantined Bunny, both adorned with a white mask — were born. Customers are encouraged to gift Trepant’s 12-euro (\$13) bunnies to local medical staff to show their support. Part of the proceeds go to charity.

One of the country’s top coronavirus experts also knows the medical virtues of laughter. Professor Marc Van Ranst told Belgian children that their Easter treats weren’t at risk.

Tongue well in cheek, he told public broadcaster VRT that the government had deeply pondered the issue of delivery rabbits’ movements in these dangerous times. The rabbits bring — Santa-like — eggs to the gardens of children, roving all over Belgium at a time when it is forbidden for the public at large.



“The decision was unanimous: it is an essential profession. Even the police have been informed that they should not obstruct the Easter bunny in its work,” he said.

There was a proviso, though.

“Rabbits will deliver to the homes of parents, not grandparents,” who are more at risk from COVID-19, Van Ranst said.

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Follow AP news coverage of the coronavirus pandemic at <https://apnews.com/VirusOutbreak> and <https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

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