

In the Spotlight

By [Anna Malpas](#)

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This week, tennis star Maria Sharapova brought the world something it only dimly realized it needed: "premium" fruit gums under her own brand called Sugarpova.

The sweets, which are so far on sale only at high-end American shops and online, come in 12 flavors. They include tiny green tennis balls and a bizarre rainbow-striped liquorice sweet with a marshmallow center. Some of them look like what you get in pick 'n' mix stands the world over, such as the jelly spiders and worms. But they come at a rather different price: \$5.99 per bag with an extra \$7.95 for shipping online. They are not on sale yet in Russia, a country still sadly lacking in variety at its sweet counters.

Apart from the tennis balls, the sweets don't have any kind of sports associations, nor do they pretend to be healthy, which is refreshing. Even though I'm not sure that a slim six-foot-two sportswoman telling people about her sweet tooth is really all that convincing. And they are clearly not aimed at children with their minimalistic packaging, hefty price and sweets in the shape of shoes and handbags.

Sharapova has emphasized that she isn't just endorsing the sweets as with her other

promotional roles, but is getting into the business herself, picking the flavors and doing quality control. Even if she did seem to avoid touching her lips to the sugar at the launch, which was streamed on her website. Bloomberg wrote that she had spent a "couple of hundred thousand dollars on the project," citing her business partner.

The launch looked enjoyably over-the-top with serious-looking people in black manning the door of a New York store that sells perfume and accessories called Henri Bendel's and a mob of fans waiting outside. People magazine wrote excitedly that Sharapova changed her outfit four times in a day.

"I feel like I've been through two pregnancies. It's been 18 months and this is my kid," Sharapova said of the product development, talking earnestly of working on "the texture of the gummies."

Sharapova left her home in Siberia when she was seven and developed her talent through training with Nick Bollettieri in California, something that has caused a certain sniffiness about her in Russia.

As one of the first Russian-born celebrities to become thoroughly fluent in English, she even irritated some people by choosing not to speak Russian at international news conferences.

Those were the same kind of complaints leveled at Anna Kournikova, a blonde with a similar background, even if Sharapova's tennis achievements have been in a different league.

But everything seems to have been forgiven lately with Sharapova chosen to carry the Russian flag at the Olympics opening ceremony and going on to win a silver medal.

She is an all-American sports personality now, complete with her sportsman fiance, basketball player Sasha Vujacic. And her savvy way with marketing is evident from her website, where tennis is almost an afterthought.

The candy launch got blanket coverage from sports media to magazines such as Vogue and People. Gossip website Gawker was one of the few to strike a skeptical note, arguing that the sweets' "premium" tag simply meant "normal product but very overpriced."

In Russia, there seemed to be a bit less enthusiasm for a product clearly not aimed at a local audience, prompting more sour than sweet headlines. "In America they are selling Maria Sharapova sweets for \$6," Moskovsky Komsomolets wrote.

"They're just full of chemicals, I'm sure she doesn't eat them" sneered a commentator called Faina on the bitchy gossip site Spletnik.ru.

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