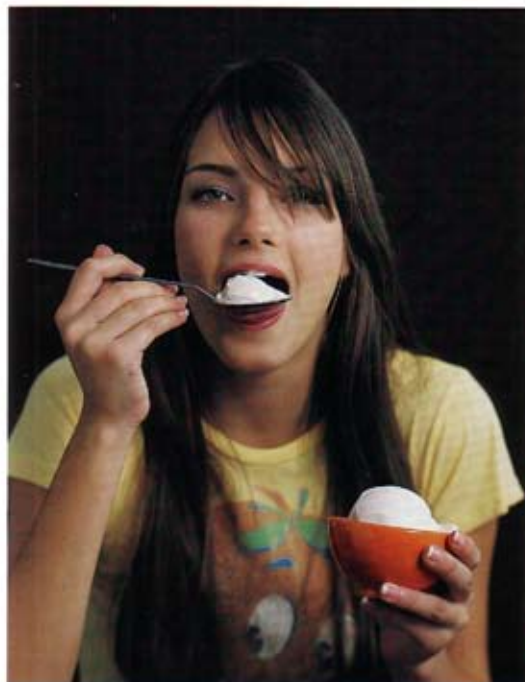




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Tactics



How to Judge Ice Cream

Jon Snyder, founder of New York's acclaimed Il Laboratorio del Gelato (and creator of the original Ciao Bella gelato), explains.

1. Flavor

You may have heard that the overall quality of an ice-cream line can be judged by tasting its vanilla. True. Simple and pure, a scoop of vanilla should have a distinctive but delicate flavor that lets you experience the texture of the ice cream without masking other quality indicators. If the vanilla's a winner, chances are you'll find the other flavors pleasing, too.

2. Presentation

Ice cream should look freshly made. Icy crystals on the surface or around the edges of the tub indicate either that the ice cream has been melted and refrozen or that it's old. Many artisan ice-cream makers will only fill a container with the amount of ice cream they think will sell that day, so a full container may not be a sign of freshness, but it's worth looking.

3. Temperature

Although most connoisseurs insist on tempering ice cream to a soft consistency to bring out maximum flavor, I say taste at the temperature you prefer. Despite a childhood spent working in my grandparents' Carvel soft-serve stand, I like to "bite" into my ice cream, and so I prefer to indulge at a harder (colder) temperature.

4. Color

Vanilla ice cream can range from pale buttery yellow (made with a custard base, often called French style) to an ivory white (or Philadelphia style, made without eggs), but it should always be uniform throughout. There should be some vanilla-bean flecks, but just because they're there doesn't mean better quality. Ice cream can be artificially flavored and "decorated" with fake specks or pieces of the whole bean. (Even if they're real, the flavor and beautiful fragrance of vanilla comes from what's inside the bean, not its bark.)

5. Aroma

As the ice cream melts on your tongue, there should be a pure taste and slightly woody aroma. Avoid the "tinny" smell and taste that comes from the alcohol of too much vanilla extract. Tahitian vanilla is often described as cherry-like; vanilla from Madagascar is milder and "sweeter"; but it takes a real "nose" to distinguish between vanilla origins in frozen ice cream.

6. Texture

There has to be some "air" in ice cream or else it would be hard as ice. But you also don't want it to be all fluffy. If there's a dirty little secret in the ice-cream business, it's the overabundance of air (called "overrun") that's often whipped into the final product. This may create more profit for the maker, but the result is a much less flavorful ice cream. So despite the beauty of ice cream completely curled under and "feathering" as it's scooped-looking textured, almost scaly, as in most print ads and magazine photos—that curling means it's too gummy, and the feathering means it's too airy. The surface of the ice cream should be smooth. There should be some heft to a cup of ice cream, and when you dig in your spoon, you should feel a little resistance.

In most print ads and magazine photos, ice cream curls under and "feathers" (gets almost scaly) as it's scooped. That curling means it's too gummy, and the feathering means it's too airy.

Smooth surface = just enough air

