

EPICURE AT LARGE



Sweet longing: One scoop or two?

Stone-Cold Delicious

From toasted sesame to plain old vanilla, artisanal ice creams across the country are thriving.

BY TED LOOS

TRUE, THE EXPRESSION is "as American as apple pie." But what's usually just to the side of a pie slice? A scoop of vanilla ice cream. There's an argument to be made that the frozen treat is truly our national dish – eaten everywhere, in any season, and by people of all backgrounds. We all scream for ice cream. The best ice creams reflect the place

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You won't have to go too far to find these ice-cream purists. Ice cream has been part of the American experience since colonial days, a treat inherited from our European ancestors, although until the middle of the nineteenth century it was pretty much only for the rich. All that changed with the advent of better transportation for naturally harvested ice and then, of course, with refrigeration.

Traces of the old ways endure. Family farms were always a key part of the

It's the mom-and-pop establishments that truly reveal the character of a place. They're selling a mini-vacation in a cone – sweet respite for any traveler.

New England landscape, and one core tradition was to make ice cream at home, says Roger Gifford, president of Gifford's Famous Ice Cream. The company is based in Skowhegan, Maine, a historic small town with a spectacular river gorge at its heart.

Gifford's runs four small "dairy bars" (as ice-cream stands are called around there) in central Maine, and they sell ice cream to regional stands and stores. Gifford says there's something typically New England in the success of small ice-cream purveyors: Yankee individuality and know-how

GREAT FLAVOR LIVES in the big city, too, in the form of ice cream's cosmopolitan cousin: gelato. Il Laboratorio del Gelato, located on New York's Lower East Side, has earned heaps of praise from critics and devotion from its many high-end restaurant clients since it opened in 2001. The total space for customers is about the size of a suburban bathroom, but the flavors loom large. Crowds come for intriguing creations like toasted sesame. It's not too savory or too sweet, a delicate balance that makes you think while you gobble it up.

Despite his shop's technical-sounding name, owner Jon Snyder – the nonsense New Yorker who founded the high-end store brand Ciao Bella in the 1980s – wants to demystify the treat. "Gelato is just the Italian word for ice cream," he says. "So I liken it to saying, 'Would you like cheese or *fromage*?'"

The Italians are on to something,

though. Traditionally, they use more milk and less cream in gelato. The argument is that less butterfat will allow the pure flavors to come through – and in a less filling way. Snyder pays homage to that idea, and if his mascarpone gelato, made with the cheese that makes tiramisu so rich, is any indication, it's a rewarding approach.

Of course, the glory of ice cream, as with many foods, comes from variety. For Jeff Sommers of Izzy's in Saint Paul, the slightly lighter style of gelato, which is often eaten in Italy as a snack to tide one over until a late dinner, is "not a good fit in our American gastronomic experience."

He likes that a cone of Izzy's Peppermint Bon Bon gives a certain finality to a meal, or a whole day. As Sommers puts it, "You don't need a piece of pizza afterwards."

It takes different 'screams for different folks. ■



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Five Scoops

CALIFORNIA

Scream'n' Mimi's, 6902 Sebastopol Avenue, Sebastopol; 707/823-5902

MAINE

Gifford's Famous Ice Cream, 503 Madison Avenue, Skowhegan; 207/474-2257

MINNESOTA

Izzy's Ice Cream, 2034 Marshall Avenue, Saint Paul; 651/603-1458

NEW YORK

Il Laboratorio del Gelato, 95 Orchard Street, New York; 212/343-9922

WISCONSIN

Kopp's Frozen Custard, 5373 N. Port Washington Road, Glendale; 414/961-3288