

Ice cream cones sweeten summer

Ice Cream: It's what makes a summer day complete.

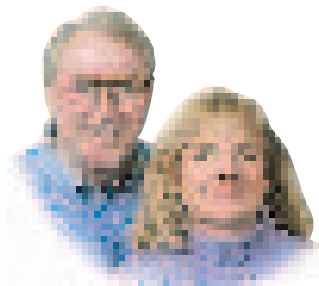
On any warm summer evening on any Main Street in any town Up North, if you see a cluster of people gathered on the sidewalk outside a particular store, you know you've found the local ice cream parlor. Almost every town has one, and if you ask any regular in the region where you can find the best ice cream, they'll all give you the same answer. The best ice cream, they'll tell you, is the ice cream at their local store.

That's why we aren't even going to pretend to rate Northern Michigan's ice creams or ice cream parlors. The best ice cream cone in northern Michigan is the one you have in your hand right now.

Since the best is always hometown ice cream, we will tell you that in our private heart of hearts, we love the buttery, stick-to-the-roof-of-your-mouth chocolate made in our hometown at the Ice Cream Peddler's by Rowland and Bonnie Johnston. But we certainly know better than to try to persuade you it's better than your favorite. Ice cream isn't a competitive sport. It's what makes a summer day complete.

So where did ice cream come from? Some historians speak of a Roman emperor who flavored ice from the Alps. Others say Marco Polo brought the recipe back from China. Some credit a 17th-century palace cook who invented it for England's Charles I. (If the latter is true, then the cook certainly contributed more to civilization than the king.) Dolly Madison served ice cream at her husband, James', inauguration as

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President in 1813, and a New Jersey lady named Nancy Johnson invented the still-familiar, hand-cranked ice-cream maker in 1845.

The thing those people outside ice cream parlors on hot summer evenings are enjoying isn't just ice cream; it's the ice cream cone. The cone was actually invented twice: once by an Italian immigrant in New York in 1896 and again eight years later by a Syrian who had a waffle stand at the St. Louis World's Fair and improvised some waffle cups for a nearby ice-cream seller who'd run out of dishes.

The things that make ice cream good are very simple: butterfat, sweetener, flavoring and air. For basic commercial stuff, the cream runs 10-12 percent butterfat; for premium-quality, it's 15 percent or more. Elk Rapids' Johnston admits to about 18 percent, and he suspects the same of most of the other well-visited shops. Butterfat is what gets flavor to taste buds and keeps it there. Sweetener not only makes it taste better, so lowers the freezing point so ice cream isn't like an ice cube. Ditto the air, which gets in during the mixing. As the mixture is mixed and

chilled, it goes from liquid to slurry to solid but airy-soft ice cream. Stop while it's still a fluid slurry and you have ice cream you can pour from a spout (think Bardon's Wonder Freeze). Add egg and you have frozen custard. Blast it with subzero air, and you have serious ice cream with a rich, buttery "mouth feel."

Vanilla is America's favorite flavor (it's about a third of all sales), and together with chocolate and butter pecan, comprises half the total market. But flavors are all over the place nowadays. Once, it was pretty much a choice of chocolate, vanilla and strawberry. But in the 1920s, a Massachusetts druggist named Howard Johnson became famous for offering 28 flavors. Baskin and Robbins upped the ante to 31. Today, Lord knows what you'll find. We've seen taco and bubblegum ice cream, and we once stumbled on a Web site documenting such flavors as mashed potato, bacon, tuna, chili, garlic, sauerkraut, beer and mustard. Good grief!

Just as flavors have exploded, so has the size of the basic ice cream cone. It used to be, "One scoop or two?" Now you'll likely get four or five scoops packed onto a cone that no ordinary mortal can possibly finish before the ice cream melts all over your hands, your clothes and the sidewalk. Even when we ask for a "small" cone, we often get two or three scoops. To get the simple, one-scoop treat we really want, we have learned to ask for "a baby cone." And make it chocolate, please ... well, maybe black cherry if it's Moomer's, or toasted coconut fudge if it's Kilwin's.



Record-Eagle/Doug Tesner

Seanan Culloty scopes up just one of the 32 flavors of ice cream at Kilwin's in downtown Traverse City.

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