

Ice cream shop celebrates 25 years of soft-serving

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July is National Ice Cream Month, the perfect time to consider the benefits of the cool stuff.

Take the case of Michelle Tharp, who found love, happiness, family and a career because of ice cream. She is the owner of Twisty Cone, a Palm Bay soft-serve shop that in August celebrates 25 years of dishing out thousands of gallons of the treat.

See if you don't agree ice cream is health food after you hear Michelle's story.

How did you get involved with Twisty Cone?

My husband's parents opened the shop in 1982. I worked there that year when I was 16. I was at Melbourne Central Catholic at the time and heard over the intercom that a new ice cream shop had opened up and they were looking for help.

As it turned out, my husband was also at MCC at the time, but he was a year younger and nowhere on my radar screen.

Did you meet at Twisty Cone?

We did, but we didn't start dating right away.

I had quit work at the shop and gone to college, but found I needed a second job. His mom called me out of the blue. It was meant to be.

At that point, he was graduating from high school. It wasn't until the next summer that we started dating.

When did you take over the store?

In 1996, my husband was a pro golfer, and I was caddying for him. We were planning on going back out, but his parents asked us if we would be interested in taking over the shop.

Was it hard getting started?

When we first opened, we pretty much lived here. We only had two girls helping us out, so we would work 120 hours a week. I would stay here cleaning until 2 a.m. and then be back at work at 7 in the morning.

Family?

My husband, Steve, our son Ian, who's 8, and our daughter Casey, 5.

My parents also live in town.

Why do you think Twisty Cone has survived so long?

We do so well because we're so hands-on. We keep a tight control on quality and customer service.

We're very picky about our employees, and they have to go through three interviews before we hire them. First, there's a preinterview at the window. Then they meet with our manager and then with me. Nobody gets hired without an interview with me.

My job is to make sure that what goes out those windows is quality and exciting. My employees' job is to deliver with consistency and with a smile. We like good attitude. One bad apple can spoil the bunch.

What makes Twisty Cone special?

Everybody has that special place they remember, and it's nice that Twisty Cone can be that. We have customers who came here when they were kids, and they're now bringing their kids.

We also look out for new products. We don't get caught up with fads, but we want to keep it exciting for the customers.

What are some of the things that keep it exciting?

We installed two Flavor Burst machines, which can inject 17 different flavors right into the ice cream, and we also have a new Crunchi-Crme machine that mixes stuff like M&Ms, Reese's Pieces and six other types of candy right into the soft-serve cone.

Our sales rep told us we are the only soft-serve store with a Crunchi-Crme machine from Jacksonville to the Palm Beaches.

Favorite dessert?

Ice cream, of course. A soft-serve vanilla dipped in chocolate is hard to beat.

Favorite beverage?

Coffee

Famous guests you would invite for ice cream?

Toby Keith, Oprah and my daughter will have to invite Zack and Cody (from Disney Channel's "The Suite Life of Zack and Cody") and the whole cast of "High School Musical."

Ice cream shop du jour

What: Twisty Cone

Where: 1615 Georgia St. N.E. (off Malabar Road), Palm Bay

Call: 676-2090 Prices: Cost for cones range from \$1.20 to \$3.90

You gotta try: On the ice cream side, the Crunchi-Crme and the Flavor Burst cones are a must. In the hot items department, check out Tharp's Frito Pie, corn chips smothered in chili and cheese (\$2.65).

Coming up: To celebrate 25 years of soft-serving, Twisty Cone will feature an item every day in August at 1982 prices. A small cone, for example, will cost 55 cents.

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