

Cold rivalry

Florida Today - Melbourne, Fla.

Author: MARIA SONNENBERG

Date: Oct 1, 2006

Start Page: C.1

Section: BUSINESS

Text Word Count: 1477

Document Text

MARIA SONNENBERG

For Florida Today

Ice cream retailers in Florida should by all rights have the scoop on sales in the state of what seems like perennial summer. Yet many local entrepreneurs have screamed, as they watched their ice cream store capital melt.

"In the last 10 years, I've seen at least four or five stores start and go out of business within five miles of ours," said Michelle Tharp, owner of Twisty Cone in Palm Bay.

Next year, Tharp's homey ice cream store will celebrate 25 years in its Malabar Road location. But, despite the fact that Twisty Cone has a loyal following of soft-serve fans, Tharp, like other independent ice cream retailers in the area, is keeping a wary eye on increasing sophisticated competition.

With the appearance locally of well-known sundae-sized franchises like Cold Stone Creamery, Marble Slab Creamery and, now, Ben & Jerry's, independent operators like Tharp must remain on their toes.

For Tharp, the formula for continued success has been a combination of location, price and customer service.

"You have to find your niche," Tharp said. "We're the hometown ice cream store."

The walk-up stand-alone building with its grassy patio invites families to spend a few bucks and a half-hour or so tasting from among the more than 25 variations of soft-serve ice cream that Tharp has available.

Price can be a big consideration for many families buying ice cream, Tharp said.

"We're not as price-prohibitive as some others," she said. "You can take a whole family for ice cream for under \$10."

At \$1.35 for a cone, Twisty Cone compares favorably in price with high-end ice cream parlors that might leave you with little change from a \$5 bill.

Tharp tries to keep prices down as much as possible.

"Every time we have to have a price increase, I cringe," she said.

To keep customers coming back, Tharp maintains a 25-plus-flavor repertoire that rivals the menu of a large franchise.

The secret to making vanilla and chocolate taste like pistachio or butter pecan lies in the Flavor Bursts machine that infuses the flavor into the soft-serve.

Keeping customer interest is paramount in Tharp's mind.

"Every year, we always add something different, trying to keep it fresh," said Tharp, who makes a yearly pilgrimage to industry trade shows to check out what's new in the market.

She admits that independents like Twisty Cone could have a tougher go of it if they were starting out in today's market.

"The marketplace is harder," she said. "If you don't have your established following, it would be harder to get going because there is so much competition."

At Moo's in Indialantic, co-owner Rick Dollard agrees.

"I don't think the chains have hurt us, because we were already established, but to get started today would be hard," he said. "There's a Cold Stone and a Marble Slab popping up everywhere."

'Instant fan base'

While independents point to stratospheric fees as the biggest negative of owning a franchise, owners of franchises beg to differ.

Matt Solomon, operator of one of the newest ice cream shops in town, the Ben & Jerry's store in Melbourne's Oaks Plaza, believes that the company's franchise fees are worth the instant recognition.

"Brand name is a very, very powerful tool," Solomon said. "You're able to pool from a nationwide experience."

Because the company's reputation precedes it, when you build a Ben & Jerry's, the customers will come, he said.

"I have an instant fan base," he said. "If I was starting from scratch, I'd have to get people to try the ice cream first, and then have them want to come back."

Ben & Jerry's, with its mixture of Vermont folksiness and Wall Street savvy, has developed a formula to give franchisees an edge from the get-go.

To assure consistency, all the ice cream, with its cleverly named flavors like Cherry Garcia and Phish Food, is made at a central Ben & Jerry's facility.

Aggressive marketing campaigns, which highlight the company's keen interest in the community, have given each franchise an identifiable brand image.

"What sets us apart is the funkiness and the social responsibility of the company," Solomon said.

For newer scoop shop owners, franchises can spell success.

Wendy Dankovchik of Bruster's in Titusville never gave a thought to going it alone.

"I wouldn't have known where to begin," she said. "Bruster's has gone through all the trouble to go through the entire process. It would have taken me a lot of time to do the same."

Bruster's provides her with detailed recipes for the more than two dozen flavors Dankovchik stocks every day.

"They are very specific with the recipes," she said. "We're not allowed to create our own."

For Denise Holshey, owner of the Soda Fountain in Melbourne Square mall, success is measured in consistency and location.

"You have to win them over the first time," Holshey said.

To assure consistency, only Holshey is allowed to make the ice cream, a job she has done every morning for the 13 years she's owned the store.

"Every time a customer comes in, I'm sure the ice cream will taste the same," she said.

Mall location crucial

The Soda Fountain is an example of how an independent scoop shop can make it without the clout of a mother company.

The store's location in the mall's food court is crucial to its success, said Holshey, who had options to locate the ice cream parlor in cheaper digs, but opted for the tried-and-true mall food court.

"Ice cream is all about traffic, and is a very spur-of-the-moment impulsive buy," she said. "It's location, location, location."

Although Marble Slab set up shop across the street from mall, and now Ben & Jerry's resides behind it, Holshey has seen little change in her profits.

At \$2.35 for a small cone of her homemade ice cream, Holshey keeps her prices lower than some of her more well-known competitors.

Sinful sundae

Ben & Jerry's Vermonster Sundae comes not in a cup, but rather in a bucket.

The \$39 treat that features 20 scoops of ice cream, four bananas, four ladles of hot fudge and 10 scoops of walnuts, among other goodies, probably could feed a village.

Hint: Best to fast for days before attempting a Vermonster.

All in the fat

To assure consistency of product, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has set standards for ice cream, regardless of brand or type. Some definitions:

--- Ice cream: The mixture of dairy products known as ice cream must contain at least 10 percent milk fat, which sets the bar for the different varieties.

--- Reduced fat: To be considered reduced fat, ice cream must contain 25 percent less total fat than the average of leading brands.

--- Light: Light ice cream refers to a product with at least 50 percent less total fat or 33 percent fewer calories than the average.

--- Low-fat and nonfat: Low-fat ice cream cannot contain more than 3 grams of total fat per half-cup serving, and nonfat ice cream must have less than 0.5 grams per serving.

--- Super-premium: Super-premium ice cream usually has a very low overrun, which refers to the aeration period during its manufacture.

--- Premium: With premium ice cream, the overrun still is low and the fat content still high. However, while the materials are of high quality, they may not be as good as those used in super-premium products.

--- Regular and economy: Both regular ice cream and economy ice cream meet federal ice cream overrun standards, but economy ice cream is usually cheaper in price.

-- International Dairy

Foods Association

Flavor factoids

Most popular: Vanilla is the top flavor choice in America, capturing 26.0 percent of the total market. Chocolate comes in a distant second with 12.9 percent, followed by Neapolitan (4.8 percent); strawberries (4.3 percent); and cookies and cream (4 percent).

Innovations: To keep customers coming back, manufacturers and ice-cream shops constantly unveil new permanent or "seasonal" flavors.

At the Soda Fountain in Melbourne Square mall, for example, owner Denise Holshey continuously experiments with new flavors.

Graham Central Station is the featured flavor at Bruster's in Titusville, while at Ben & Jerry's in Melbourne, customers have until the end of the month to try Sublime Key Lime before it's replaced by Pumpkin Cheesecake.

We eat how much?

--- In 2004, United States production of ice cream was 1.6 billion gallons, or about 21.5 quarts per person.

--- 2004 sales figures of ice cream and frozen desserts was \$21.4 billion, of which \$13.3 billion were spent at ice cream shops, food-service and retail sales outlets.

--- Ice cream is eaten in 90 percent of U.S. households.

--- The United States is the world leader when it comes to making ice cream. California is the top-producing state, followed by Indiana, Texas, Illinois, Pennsylvania and Minnesota.