

Thrill of the chill

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Consider this your requisite ice cream story of the summer. It's certainly the perfect time for it.

In 1984, President Reagan, the fellow who loved jelly beans, appropriately designated the usually steamy month of July as National Ice Cream Month and the third Sunday of the month as National Ice Cream Day.

If contractors and suppliers cooperate, 2006's National Ice Cream Day -- July 16 this year -- will mark a significant Brevard County ice cream milestone: the opening of the county's first Ben & Jerry's ice cream parlor.

Thank Matt Solomon for providing us with what many ice cream lovers think heaven must look like.

The real estate boom was kind to Solomon, affording him the wherewithal to tuck this 1,800-square-foot of ice cream nirvana right between the Premiere Oaks 10 Cinema and Sullivan's Jewelers at the Oaks Plaza behind Melbourne Square.

Shooting for a mid-July soft opening, Solomon may just make National Ice Cream Day.

And while Ben & Jerry's is great, mighty fine ice cream makers, businesses like Cold Stone, Marble Slab and Bruster's already cater to Brevard's sweet tooth.

There even are plenty of homegrown favorites, like Northstar Ice Cream Depot in West Melbourne, a little folksy place where regulars like to pig out on Lisa McDermott's banana splits. (By the way, National Banana Split Day is July 25, so plan accordingly.)

It wasn't always that way.

It's surprising, considering the steambath climate of the area, that not too many moons ago Brevard ice cream establishments were rare.

Other than a few stalwarts like Del's Freeze in Melbourne and Twisty Cone in Palm Bay, few ice cream shops thrived.

Palm Bay city planner Robert Loring remembers his childhood in Brevard meant regular trips to Del's in Melbourne.

"Del's was the only game in town," he said. "It's been an institution for many years, kind of a hangout."

Loring still hangs at Del's a couple of times a month. These days, however, he brings the wife and kids.

The younger Lorings, like most kids, love soft serve.

"I think it's easier for kids to bite into soft serve," said Michelle Tharp, owner of Twisty Cone, another Brevard ice cream landmark. "It's softer, creamier."

Next year, Twisty Cone will celebrate 25 years of serving creaminess to Palm Bay families.

And 97 percent of Tharp's workers cut their teeth on Twisty Cone soft serve.

"They tell me they absolutely have to work here because they grew up coming here," Tharp said. "It's near and dear to everyone's hearts."

A lot has changed in the soft serve industry since 1982, when Tharp's in-laws opened shop in the tiny store off Malabar Road.

Vanilla, chocolate and black and white are still available. But you can now enjoy 32 kid-friendly flavors, from Cotton Candy to Bubblegum, thanks to "flavor burst machines" that revolutionized the business.

Last month, Tharp installed a candy mixer that adds Oreos, M&M's and other goodies directly into the ice cream, not just on top of it.

"We're the first on the east coast of Florida to have it," she said.

While pilgrimages to local ice cream shops like Twisty Cone make the day for many, others prefer eating the stuff in the privacy of their homes.

Marion Getson of Suntree rarely visits an ice cream emporium, opting instead for a creamy fix from her local supermarket. For one, it's convenient. For another, it's cheap.

"It's always on sale," she said. "It's usually buy one, get one free. Two weeks ago, it was Breyer's."

Getson thinks most good ice creams are tasty, but never as wonderful as the scoops she enjoyed as a girl during the Depression.

"The ice cream is not as good as I remember," she said, but admits time often imbues a rosy glow on things, including ice cream.

Growing up in Pittston, Pa., Getson and her family would stop by Grablick's Dairy as a Sunday night treat.

"You could get two dips for a nickel, yet we still didn't have access to it every day," she said. "It was a treat."

Ice cream is slightly more expensive these days.

Getson, who loves ice cream because it's the easiest and fastest dessert to prepare, is trying to cut back on the stuff in hopes of losing a few pounds before an upcoming trip to California.

"Hah!" said daughter Eileen Bentley, who knows Mom's weakness for the king of treats.

Besides the fact it smoothly cools our palates, ice cream also warms our hearts with memories of the carefree summer days of youth when ice cream headaches were a badge of honor.

"It makes you melt in more ways than one," Chris Norton, Palm Bay's economic development director, said. "It brings you back to your childhood."

Some ice cream lovers, not content with the commercial stuff, opt to make their own.

College parties for Norton included passing a hand-cranked ice cream maker around the room to take turns running the crank.

"It would be done in a couple of minutes," he said.

Did you know?

Ice cream headaches are a real but temporary malady, according to Joseph Hulihan of Temple University, who attributes the pain to the dilation of blood vessels in your head when the ice cream triggers a nerve center at the roof of your mouth.

Top 5 flavors

July is National Ice Cream Month (thanks to President Reagan, who made it official in 1984). Celebrate with a scoop or two. Here are the five favorite flavors, according to the International Dairy Foods Association:

--- Vanilla, 26 percent

--- Chocolate, 12.9 percent

--- Neapolitan, 4.8 percent

--- Strawberry, 4.3 percent

--- Cookies and Cream, 4.0 percent

Ben & Jerry's winners and losers

Jerry Garcia, up there playing some heavenly rock music, is probably stoked that his moniker made it into not just one, but two top 10 Ben & Jerry's flavors. Garcia, never one for the lighter side of appetites, would be amused the low-fat frozen yogurt named in his memory is so popular.

Here are the winners

1. Cherry Garcia Ice Cream
2. Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough
3. Chunky Monkey
4. Chocolate Fudge Brownie
5. Half Baked
6. New York Super Fudge Chunk
7. Phish Food
8. Coffee Heath Bar Crunch
9. Cherry Garcia Low Fat Frozen Yogurt
10. Peanut Butter Cup Ice Cream

And the fallen from flavor

"Seinfeld" fans are still mourning the loss of Festivus, released by B&J in 2000 and again in 2001. Alas, not too many folks must have celebrated Festivus for the rest of us in 2001, and the ice cream was buried in Ben & Jerry's Flavor Graveyard, joining other failed flavors like

From Russia with Buzz: There are still some people out there who haven't been able to sleep since eating this concoction of dark coffee ice cream, coffee liqueur and espresso fudge chips. Enough caffeine here to wake up Jerry Garcia.

Honey, I'm Home: Vanilla with fudge-covered honeycomb pieces that was not to "bee."

Peanuts! Popcorn!: Popcorn, peanuts and ice cream -- what were they thinking?

The Full VerMonty: Cute name and not bad maple ice cream. Just not popular in Florida, and 48 other states.

Honey Apple Raisin Chocolate Cookie: Perhaps people got tired just trying to say the name.

-- Ben & Jerry's

Here's the scoop

Industry folklore claims Emperor Nero hankered for a sorbetlike dessert made using ice that slaves hurriedly brought back from nearby mountains. Marco Polo supposedly tasted Chinese ice cream and got a hold of the recipe.

Both stories may be disputed, but one thing is for sure: Before the advent of refrigeration, making ice cream was a laborious process that could only be regularly afforded by the wealthy.

--- Former dairy farmer Jacob Fussell opened the United States' first commercial ice cream factory in Baltimore in 1851, putting ice cream in reach of the hungry masses. His wildly successful ice cream parlors eventually were sold to Borden.

--- German engineer Carl von Linde helped father the modern ice cream industry with his invention of industrial refrigeration, which later was perfected into the continuous process freezer.

--- In 1843, Nancy Johnson patented a hand-cranked ice cream freezer and sold the rights for \$200.

--- Modern ice cream is made from milk fat, milk solids, sweeteners, stabilizers, water and air incorporated during the whipping process.

--- Generally, the less expensive the ice cream, the more the air is incorporated, as much as 50 percent of total volume.

--- Fine ice creams have between 3 percent and 15 percent air.

--- In 1924, Americans ate less than four quarts of ice cream per person per year, versus 15 quarts today.

-- International Association of Ice Cream Manufacturers