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Cold Comfort: Ice Cream & America

By Lee Ratliff

ICE CREAM OCCUPIES a prominent place in the iconography of American culture. It ranks with baseball and apple pie in its ability to evoke Norman Rockwell images of uniquely American collective memories. From soda jerks and poodle skirts to Eskimo Pie and the Fourth of July, ice cream seems to have always been part of the essential American experience.

Of course, ice cream is not uniquely American. Its roots extend back thousands of years to Arabia, Persia, and China where it began as snow flavored with honey and fruit juices. Over the millennia it has been shaped by regional cultures to become dozens of variations known around the world as ice cream, gelato, sherbet, kulfi, dondurma, and many other names. But America has played a pivotal role in the evolution of this cold and creamy treat, transforming it from the dessert of wealthy aristocracy to an affordable treat accessible to anyone, anytime, anywhere.

THE FRENCH CONNECTION

Although they were not the first to

bring ice cream to the New World, our founding fathers were definitely involved in the popularization of the dessert in revolutionary America. In fact, one might describe George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Ben Franklin as ice cream fanatics. Records show that Mr. Washington spent over \$200 on ice cream in the summer of 1790 - an expensive habit he'd developed years earlier after eating ice cream at a party hosted by a French diplomat in Philadelphia. Jefferson, a renowned gourmet, returned from France with an ice cream pot freezer or "sorbetiere," 50 vanilla pods, and recipes he'd copied from French chefs. Dolly Madison made a splash in high society when she served strawberry ice cream at her husband's second inaugural ball.

Ice cream remained a dessert of the elite until a flurry of technological advances occurred in the mid-19th century. Up to that point, making ice cream was a very tedious process, requiring a certain level of skill and lots of labor. It used quantities of very perishable cream, expensive sugar,

and masses of ice, which was harvested from lakes in the winter and stored in icehouses for use in the summer. The pewter sorbetiere bowl was placed in a pan of ice and salt while the chef whisked the cream and sugar mixture for 45 minutes or more. It was expensive, exhausting, and produced very small quantities. But with the invention of the geared rotary crank ice cream freezer, the centrifugal cream separator, and industrial refrigeration, the path to inexpensive and accessible ice cream was clear.

A NATION OF ICE CREAM EATERS

America's infatuation with newly affordable luxuries like ice cream may have led to an underestimation of its abilities by some nations, much to their eventual regret. Early in World War I, newspapers quoted a German officer speaking on the prospects of war with America, "We do not fear that nation of ice cream eaters." Ice cream was so popular, the industry successfully lobbied for the treat to be classified as an "essential food," thus eligible for much sought after sugar rations.

In the days leading up to and throughout the war, state after state banned alcohol, until Prohibition was successful on the federal level with the ratification of the 18th amendment in 1919. One consequence of Prohibition was to boost to the sale of ice cream as an alternative to alcohol. Ice cream sales, already brisk, became white hot in the 1920s as bars were converted to ice cream parlors and breweries became ice cream factories. Ice cream novelties like the Eskimo Pie, Good Humor bar, and Popsicle were introduced to eager consumers during this period.

World War II slowed ice cream consumption on the home front due to milk and sugar rationing, but the military picked up some of the slack. The Navy learned that ice cream had an even bigger impact on morale than beer, so they began an all-out effort to distribute the dessert to Navy personnel around the globe. The Army conducted a similar campaign. The Navy began outfitting ships with ice cream equipment and even commissioned a \$1 million ice cream barge that had the capacity to produce 1500 gallons per hour. It had no engines of its own, but could be towed from location to location to produce ice cream wherever it was needed. At the height of the war, the US military became

the world's largest ice cream manufacturer, churning out 80,000,000 gallons per year.

Despite the Navy's efforts, not every ship had ice cream making facilities. The largest ships, such as aircraft carriers, could be counted on to have a somewhat reliable supply of the treat. This led to a reward system in which ships were given 10 or 20 gallons of ice cream when they returned rescued pilots to their carrier. And since sailors often had no access to captured enemy souvenirs, ice cream became a currency that facilitated many GI-to-sailor transactions. Aircrews weren't left out of the ice cream enjoyment. It was common practice for airmen to strap containers of milk, cream, and sugar within nose cones or bomb-bay doors where the constant agitation and frigid temperatures of high altitude would produce ice cream even in tropical climates.

THE GOLDEN AGE

Ice cream consumption soared immediately after World War II because of the end of rationing, increased affluence, and the newest kitchen innovation

– the refrigerator. These factors and the optimism of the era led to a kind of “golden age” of ice cream. Ice cream trucks trolled suburban neighborhoods like modern-day Pied Pipers, their familiar jingle tempting children with the promise of a cold treat. Soda jerks plied their trade at the local pharmacy fountain while Howard Johnson's trademark orange roofs beckoned motorists to stop for its famous “world of 28 flavors.” This was also the era of homemade ice cream as motorized churns and readily available ice made it an easy back porch indulgence. Many of us harbor nostalgic childhood memories of opening the canister and scooping out a soft dollop even before the dasher was removed. That first taste, with its burst of fresh flavor, sticks in our minds forever.

Today we have more choices available to us than ever before. From economy to super-premium, gelato to custard, apricot to zabaglione, there's a scoop out there for everyone.

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