

I scream, you scream: America's love affair with ice cream

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Two girls enjoy an ice cream treat on a hot summer day. Photo by: JGI/Jamie Grill/Getty Images

America's Founding Fathers helped create a nation of ice cream lovers. Going back to George Washington, they spared no expense or hardship in making frozen treats. Many 18th-century foods, such as eel pie, have fallen into obscurity, but ice cream remains a dominant force.

Even in times of political strife, Americans are united in their love of ice cream. The average American devours 48 pints per year, and the country as a whole spends about \$10 billion each year on the frozen treat.

A Delicacy For The Elite

We can thank George Washington for America's early interest in the treat. Renowned for his sweet tooth, Washington was hooked when he got his first taste of ice cream in the late 18th century. It's believed Washington may have been introduced to ice cream by Norborne Berkeley, 4th Baron Botetourt, who was the royal governor of Virginia between 1768 and 1770.

The first couple bought pricey ice cream-making equipment and served the treat at soirees in New York City and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. A detailed list of ice cream-related kitchenware includes a 309-piece service with "2 Iceries Complete," 12 "ice plates," and 36 "ice pots" from the estate at Mount Vernon.

During the early years of our country, though, ice cream was for the elite. Most Americans had never even heard of it. Still, even centuries before Instagram, food trends had a way of catching on. Thomas Jefferson, who first tasted it in France, helped popularize ice cream by recording the first recipe for it in the United States. The ingredients were simple enough - six egg yolks, a half-pound of sugar, two bottles of good cream and one vanilla bean - but cooks had to go through an 18-step process and use a little muscle.

This was also a time before ice cream makers had been invented. Jefferson recommended making it in a primitive "sorbetiere." The contraption consisted of a covered pail with a handle, and churning it by hand in the ice for 10 minutes before sticking it in a mold to set. Jefferson had ice houses built at Monticello in 1802 to preserve perishable foods such as butter, and he liked to have plenty on hand to make ice cream.

Flavors That Aren't On Ben & Jerry's Menu

Modern-day chefs are not the first to churn the likes of fish sauce and foie gras into ice cream. First Lady Dolley Madison had a taste for more extreme flavors two centuries ago. One of her favorites was ice cream made with fresh oysters. She toned things down a bit for her husband's second inaugural ball by serving plain ice cream with strawberries.

There were, of course, the expected mistakes when dealing with a new food item. Assuming that a pyramid of cake was made out of ice cream, a White House guest of President Martin Van Buren "cut away" at it vigorously with a spoon. In the process, he "overthrew the whole structure," according to Anne Cooper Funderburg in "Chocolate, Strawberry and Vanilla."

Refrigeration Contributed To Ice Cream's Popularity

Unfortunately, eating milky desserts could be dangerous in the days before pasteurization. Historians still argue about whether President Zachary Taylor died after gorging on ice milk and frozen cherries during a Fourth of July party in 1850.

But thankfully, a few inventions made ice cream safer and more convenient in the early 20th century. Better refrigeration meant less spoilage. And the truck eventually replaced the horse-drawn wagon as a means of distribution. Another new ice cream delivery system, the waffle cone, hit the scene at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904, although there's still a raging debate about who should get credit for it.

Ice cream even became a rite of passage for newcomers to the United States. Immigrants who landed on Ellis Island were often given a scoop during their first meal in the states to help them get used to their new surroundings, but sometimes this gesture of goodwill backfired. In 1902, several arrivals from Italy were alarmed by the strange temperature and texture of this food and asked for it to be "warmed up," according to the New York Times.

Passion for ice cream reached a new intensity during Prohibition, when men were urged to visit the soda fountain instead of the bars. In 1920, the nation's first year without legalized alcohol, consumers wolfed down 260 million gallons of ice cream.

Cold War And Cold Desserts

The modern era only increased the national passion for frozen treats, and American presidents continued to do their part. In 1969, while traveling to a historic meeting with South Vietnam's President Nguyen Van Thieu, President Richard M. Nixon visited Hawaii. He became obsessed with macadamia nut ice cream. Nixon asked to have a three-gallon pack sent by air to the White House. He had another three-gallon pack sent from Hawaii 10 months later when he went to award the Apollo 13 astronauts the Medal of Freedom.

The macadamia flavor was available only on the West Coast and Hawaii. The manager of Alpha Beta supermarket in San Clemente, California, used to get a heads-up when Nixon was coming to town. That way, the store could have a supply of the flavor on hand.

In the following years, the Cold War lingered, and so did the presidential preoccupation with frozen desserts. In 1984, Ronald Reagan declared July as National Ice Cream Month. He proclaimed ice cream to be a "wholesome food, enjoyed by over 90 percent of the people in the United States."

Three decades later, Vice President Joe Biden seemed to have taken that proclamation to heart and made ice cream eating a patriotic duty. Biden, who famously ate ice cream with Jimmy Fallon, recently had a flavor named after him at Cornell University. Biden dubbed himself the "ice cream guy" and has enjoyed a cone at many small-town shops across the country. He proudly declared his addiction to the owners of Penny Creamery in Santa Cruz, California, in 2010 when he said, "I am a genuine lover of ice cream. I don't drink. I don't smoke. But I eat a lot of ice cream."

There's even a proven tie-in between political parties and flavors. Republicans favor chocolate, and Democrats like vanilla, according to a 2011 Harris Poll. President Donald Trump apparently loves cherry vanilla, and he orders two scoops of ice cream for his pies while his guests are expected to be content with just one. Trump also has an ice cream parlor named after him in Trump Tower.

In these heated political times, cooling down with a cone has never been a better idea. This summer we may agree on little else.

Quiz

- 1 According to the article, consuming and transporting ice cream have become much more efficient over the years.

Which paragraph from the section "Refrigeration Contributed To Ice Cream's Popularity" BEST supports the idea outlined above?

- 2 Read the selection from the section "Cold War And Cold Desserts."

"In the following years, the Cold War lingered, and so did the presidential preoccupation with frozen desserts. In 1984, Ronald Reagan declared July as National Ice Cream Month. He proclaimed ice cream to be a "wholesome food, enjoyed by over 90 percent of the people in the United States."

Which of the following can be inferred from this selection?

- (A) As conflicts in the United States worsened, presidents became less focused on their love for ice cream.
- (B) Presidents have noted Americans' love of ice cream and capitalized on this during times of turmoil.
- (C) When times were tough in the United States, presidents often turned to ice cream to help them through difficult decisions.
- (D) As the Cold War continued, people were struggling financially and buying less ice cream than before.

- 3 According to the article, ice cream became increasingly popular when other goods were becoming outlawed in the United States.

Which selection from the article BEST supports the MAIN idea above?

- (A) But thankfully, a few inventions made ice cream safer and more convenient in the early 20th century. Better refrigeration meant less spoilage. And the truck eventually replaced the horse-drawn wagon as a means of distribution. Another new ice cream delivery system, the waffle cone, hit the scene at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904, although there's still a raging debate about who should get credit for it.
- (B) Ice cream even became a rite of passage for newcomers to the United States. Immigrants who landed on Ellis Island were often given a scoop during their first meal in the states to help them get used to their new surroundings, but sometimes this gesture of goodwill backfired.
- (C) Passion for ice cream reached a new intensity during Prohibition, when men were urged to visit the soda fountain instead of the bars. In 1920, the nation's first year without legalized alcohol, consumers wolfed down 260 million gallons of ice cream.
- (D) In the following years, the Cold War lingered, and so did the presidential preoccupation with frozen desserts. In 1984, Ronald Reagan declared July as National Ice Cream Month. He proclaimed ice cream to be a "wholesome food, enjoyed by over 90 percent of the people in the United States."

- 4 Read the paragraph from the section "A Delicacy For The Elite."

This was also a time before ice cream makers had been invented. Jefferson recommended making it in a primitive "sorbetiere." The contraption consisted of a covered pail with a handle, and churning it by hand in the ice for 10 minutes before sticking it in a mold to set. Jefferson had ice houses built at Monticello in 1802 to preserve perishable foods such as butter, and he liked to have plenty on hand to make ice cream.

Which CENTRAL idea of the article is MOST supported by the paragraph?

- (A) Thomas Jefferson first made ice cream popular when he returned home from a trip to France.
- (B) Thomas Jefferson helped spark ideas for some of the modern-day ice cream makers.
- (C) Thomas Jefferson realized how difficult it was to make ice cream and played a large role in making the process more efficient.
- (D) If Thomas Jefferson hadn't changed the process of making ice cream, it would still be accessible only to the wealthy.

