



Flavors (and inclusions) rule the ice cream market

By Sarah M. Kennedy
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Sweet and salty, heat paired with sweet, exotic flavor combinations, alcohol-inspired flavors, and a slew of new limited-edition/seasonal flavors — these are just some of the flavor trends making their way through the ice cream aisles. Ice cream processors are looking for flavor inspiration in a variety of places, from restaurants and chefs to bars and coffee shops. Flavor truly rules the market.

As Chicago-based Mintel explained in a 2014 report, the expanded flavor varieties speak to consumer interest in taste; according to survey data, 69% of respondents identify flavor as most important to them.

Ice cream processors are making the most of consumers' adventurous palates.

"We see a trend in thinking outside of the box. This means unique ingredient pairings or using ingredients that may not traditionally be found in ice cream," said Nathan Arnold, marketing manager for **Velvet Ice Cream**, Utica, Ohio. "Many ice cream brands across the country are experimenting with wine, liqueurs, unique and exotic fruits and more, to create a nontraditional ice cream flavor."

He explained, “We did this with our recent bourbon pecan flavor. We added real bourbon to a pecan ice cream to give it a unique and grownup taste.”

The bourbon pecan is part of the company’s new all-natural line introduced last year. The line also includes salted chocolate fudge, which contains a unique salt-infused chocolate variegate, according to Arnold, and it also plays into the sweet and salty trend.

General Manager Cary Grover from **Hudsonville Creamery & Ice Cream Company**, Holland, Mich., noted “how flavors have transcended eating occasions and [are] also borrowing from consumers’ beverage and bakery preferences.”

He explained, “Consumers, especially millennials, are looking for new, bold yet simple and natural flavors.”

Rich Draper, CEO of **The Ice Cream Club**, Boynton Beach, Fla., said they see indulgent flavors (or flavors that focus on taste, richness, a multitude of inclusions and decadent combinations) moving the most.

“Multiple ingredient flavors, along with giving consumers a vast variety of choices are in demand. Artisan and locally sourced are [also] in the forefront of consumer’s minds,” he said.

According to Glennise Humphrey, vice president of sales and marketing for **Boulder Organic Ice Cream**, Boulder, Colo., salted caramel continues to be a trend in ice cream. The company recently added salted caramel crunch and chocolate pudding flavors to its lineup. Some of its other flavors include Island Coconut, cinnamon, green tea, Mexican chocolate and sweet cream. The company also offers a salted caramel café flavor in its Figo! Organic Gelato line.

Keeping up with the salted caramel trend, **Umpqua Dairy Products Co.**, Roseburg, Ore., added a salted caramel peanut flavor to its line as a full-time flavor in February.

Another concept showing up in ice cream is an increase in savory flavors and flavors with heat, according to Matt Thornicroft, assistant marketing and communications manager for **Pierre’s Ice Cream Co.**, Cleveland. He cites consumers “growing appetite for adventure,” when it comes to their food and dessert.

Pierre’s added to its Signature Collection at the end of last year with the first in its Chef’s Signature series. Thornicroft said the collection was designed to celebrate Northeast Ohio’s growing reputation as a culinary destination. Cleveland celebrity chef Steve Schimoler designed the first two flavors — Croppy Road (chocolate ice cream with chocolate covered marshmallow cups, almonds and a smokey salted caramel swirl) and Holé Molé (cinnamon ice cream blended with chili choco chips, chocolate-covered toffee pieces and a molé fudge swirl.)

Thornicorft explained, “With Holé Molé, a flavor inspired by a signature dessert of the same name served at Chef Steve’s Crop Bistro restaurant, the heat is a part of the experience, but not so much that it overwhelms or overshadows the other flavors.”

Inclusions and more inclusions

“Combinations of inclusions [used] to entice and differentiate brands are on the rise,” said Draper. He cited the company’s Garbage Can flavor as an example, which has seven different name brand candy bar inclusions along with granulated peanuts.

Hudsonville features many unique flavors and inclusions in its year-round offerings, like Candy Bar Whirl (with candy bar pieces and caramel), Caramel Deer Traxx (includes caramel-filled chocolate cups) and Sea Side Caramel (which includes caramel sea salt truffles.) The company also highlights its Midwestern roots with flavors like Sleeping Bear Dunes Bear Hug, a Michigan-inspired flavor that includes chocolate-covered cashews and a thick caramel swirl; or Grand Traverse Bay Cherry Fudge, inspired by the cherry capital of the world. This flavor is made with chocolate-covered cherries, blended with chunks of cherries, amaretto-flavored ice cream and a thick fudge ripple.

Hudsonville even launched what it calls its first “retro” flavor. According to Grover, the company was getting requests to bring back one of its heritage flavors — French Silk. Featuring chocolate mousse ice cream and dark chocolate flakes, the flavor is in stores now.

Processors should take note. Flavors labeled “retro” or “heritage” could be another way to generate buzz. Sometimes it’s all in the unique marketing or theme.

No stranger to themes is **Ben & Jerry’s**, Burlington, Vt. (a subsidiary of Unilever). Known for its special flavors, the company launched Saturday Night Live-inspired flavors last year to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the famous television series. The first three of the four flavors - Two Wild & Crazy Pies (coconut cream and chocolate cream pie ice creams with a chocolate cookie swirl), Lazy Sunday (includes chocolate and yellow cupcake pieces and a chocolate frosting swirl) and Gilly’s Catastrophic Crunch (includes caramel clusters, fudge-covered almonds and a marshmallow swirl) — are currently in scoop shops nationwide. The final flavor in the series is expected to be released this spring, to wrap up the celebration of SNL’s 40th anniversary.

Along with the salted caramel trend, Derek Scott, director of marketing at **Kemps**, St. Paul, Minn., said it continues to see candy inclusions as a trend (candy bars, peanut butter cups, chocolate truffles), as well co-branding and branded flavor names with the leading candy brands (like Snicker’s, Oreo, Reese’s, Girl Scouts).

Tis the season for flavor

Though certainly not new, seasonal and limited-edition flavors are growing among many brands. Processors use this method to test out new flavors or to generate excitement that ties into a specific season.

“You see it in all grocery categories. Cookie, chip, candy and even soda companies are getting into the seasonal mix,” said Velvet’s Arnold. “I think the following really started with some coffee shops having a cult-like following for their seasonal drinks. It made customers, especially millennials, crave something new that they can only get for a short period of time.”

Hudsonville makes seasonal and limited-time flavors really work to its advantage. It offers a variety of limited-edition flavors throughout the year. As Grover noted, many are inspired by the change of the seasons, while others feature flavors developed in exclusive partnership with prominent organizations, such as Grand Hotel of Mackinac Island (Grand Hotel Pecan Ball), the Detroit Tigers MLB Baseball Club (Tiger Traxx) and the Chicago Bears NFL Football Club (Bear Traxx).

“Other offerings focus on flavors that resonate with consumers in specific markets and bring a regional taste to all, such as Chicago Caramel Popcorn, which we added to the limited-edition line last year,” Grover said.

The company also continued its partnership with the Pure Michigan brand with its release of Pure Michigan Winter Campfire, featuring a marshmallow swirl, graham cracker pieces and chocolate flakes; and Pure Michigan Lake Superior Thaw, featuring a hot chocolate ice cream with mint chocolate swirl pieces that resemble “greenstones,” Michigan’s state’s gemstone. See more of Hudsonville’s newest limited-edition flavors in [Eat.Drink.Dairy](#).

Jim Myrick, ice cream sales manager for Umpqua, said that its seasonal flavor and flavor-of-the-month programs are an area that the company puts a lot of its marketing efforts behind.

“We will often test a new flavor as a seasonal offering to see if it has enough appeal to become a full time flavor in the future,” he said. Like this summer, its newest offering will be a lemon-based flavor.

Myrick said Umpqua’s been doing seasonal flavors for over 50 years, and it helps to “create a conversation” with customers, who look forward to old favorites coming back each season.

Clean labels play a part

Alongside flavor trends, clean labels and natural ingredients (and packaging that calls it out) has its place in the ice cream aisle.

In February, **Breyers**, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., (a brand of Unilever) announced that its now using milk and cream from cows not treated with artificial growth hormones across all of its product offerings.

Velvet's Arnold emphasized how consumers continue to look for "cleaner labels using ingredients they can pronounce."

Hudsonville Ice Cream launched an entirely new line this year called Naturals. The line is made with all-natural ingredients, is gluten-free and uses milk that is rBST-free. It comes in four flavors: vanilla bean, chocolate cocoa bean, strawberry and salted caramel. The chocolate cocoa bean is made with just milk, cane sugar, cream, skim milk, organic natural cocoa, carob bean gum and vanilla. The ice cream will be sold in 48-ounce cartons, and will be found in the super-premium and natural/organic sections of major retailers and independent grocers throughout Michigan, the Chicago area, as well as in Ohio and Indiana.

In 2014 Velvet Ice Cream introduced an all-natural line of ice cream which combines both trends of unique flavors and all-natural ingredients, said Arnold. The line has four flavors: vanilla, bourbon pecan, salted chocolate fudge and vanilla chocolate duo. The ingredient lists are short, easy to understand, with natural flavors and ingredients. For example, the vanilla flavor is made with just cream, skim milk, sugar, natural tara gum and pure vanilla.

This gives ice cream makers something to think about. Clean labels don't have to be about changing an entire line. They can be just one of many options consumers can choose from. Do they want an ice cream loaded up with inclusions? Is taste their No. 1 preference? Or do they prefer their frozen treat with minimal ingredients? Do they want both?

For example, Velvet has something for almost everyone: a premium line with plenty of unique and seasonal flavors, an all-naturals line, a no-sugar added option and Churned, for those looking for half the fat and one-third the calories.

One thing is clear, for most ice cream purchasers it's about options, whether new and unique flavors or simple ingredients.