

Ice Cream: Where We're Still Pretty Much Stuck in 1983



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By Josh Ozersky

The great ice cream apocalypse never happened. I really thought it would. With the rise of lower-fat alternatives such as gelato and fro-yo (frozen yogurt) and the ever increasing popularity of high-end brands like Ben & Jerry's, I figured that traditional, nonorganic, non-Belgian chocolate, standard-issue ice cream would have become by now a vast if profitable backwater, like margarine — or talking-animal movies. But no! As recently reported [here](#), old-school ice cream is bigger than ever. How is this possible? Are Americans really still happy eating plain-vanilla ice cream? (See [pictures of ice cream that will make you scream](#).)

It seems hard to believe on the surface of it. Our [tastes in pizza](#) have changed, our tastes in chicken and hamburgers, soda and milk — nearly everything we consume at least looks or sounds a little different from what it did five or 10 years ago. But Baskin-Robbins, to take one example, looks and tastes pretty much the same as it did 20 or 30 years ago. When the chain pulled five unpopular flavors last month, fans reeled and [started a Facebook campaign](#) to keep French Vanilla. Even the upscale ice creams, like Ben & Jerry's and Häagen-Dazs, haven't seen a major rival emerge in a generation. The last one was probably Frusen Glädjé, a brand so dead that apparently [even its owners don't seem to know what happened to it](#).

Meanwhile, ice cream's rivals have seen a golden age of innovation. A day doesn't seem to go by without another fro-yo franchise launching itself upon the world or a new *kulfi* chain announcing its U.S. expansion plans. (Actually, that last bit hasn't happened yet, but I'm sure it will.) Here's a look at the major ice cream products on the market today — at least the ones I know about. I'm not including sherbet, sorbet, Tofutti, soy ice cream, water ice or any other nondairy-based freak show. I feel bad for the lactose intolerant, but we have to draw the line somewhere. ([Comment on this story](#).)

Premium Ice Cream

This is the good stuff, the high-butterfat fix you should get if you only eat ice cream once in a while. Häagen-Dazs and Ben & Jerry's are the twin titans here, the Coke and Pepsi of the field, but there are a bunch of boutique brands (Godiva, Edy's/Dreyer's, Cold Stone Creamery) as well as the once mighty Breyers, still selling well despite being the forgotten man of the high-end ice cream segment. hilariously, Breyers, Edy's/Dreyer's and Ben & Jerry's are now all owned by Unilever. ([See the 12 tastiest new foods.](#))

Light Ice Cream

In my childhood there was a horrible product called ice milk that my grandmother sometimes bought, and this seems to be its descendant. It's better than it used to be, owing to high-tech air-churning methods that make less seem like more, but it's still fattening when you eat a big bowl of it, which of course you will, to make up for the fact that it's not as good as real ice cream.

Gelato

Denser, creamier and richer than any premium ice cream, good gelato is the best frozen dessert in the world, in my opinion. You can buy it in good supermarkets (Ciao Bella and G.S. are the best I've tried), but it's best at various small, artisanal operations such as Capogiro in Philadelphia, Grom and Il Laboratorio del Gelato in New York City and Bulgarini in Los Angeles. Somewhere near you someone is making gelato well. Go there immediately. ([See pictures of Carpigiani Gelato University.](#))

Frozen Yogurt

Pinkberry, Red Mango, Tasti D-Lite, TCBY, Yogurtland ... There are so many different frozen-yogurt brands today that it's easy to forget what a marginal thing this stuff used to be. Then they found a way to make it as sweet as frozen custard (and about as healthy) and the boom began. The real deal is a probiotic, slightly sour dessert that no amount of jimmies can make palatable, at least to me. But then, I'm a vulgarian. I prefer ...

Frozen Custard

Frozen yogurt's ghetto cousin, this is the beloved soft-serve sold on city streets to deliriously happy children and spooning couples. It comes from powders and liquids, is filled with whey and chemicals and generally has no more to do with actual custard than the engine block of a Chevy Nova. The one exception is the denser, egg-enriched version, essentially American gelato, found in Wisconsin landmarks like Leon's and Kopp's and in New York City's Shake Shack.

Goat-Milk Ice Cream

This sounds truly awful, and in fact I went for years without trying it. But it's actually excellent! Laloo's seems to be the only producer of this stuff, but given that it has half the fat of gelato and almost no taste of goat milk, I would assume that more are on the way.

Now that's a lot of frozen-dairy desserts. And yet, plain, regular, no-frills ice cream is still going strong. It's taken enormous amounts of research and months of analysis, but I believe I have come up with the answer why. There are more Americans eating more ice cream who are fat, and there will never be enough ice cream-type products to feed us all. And the reason is that all ice cream is good. The rock-hard novelty cones in my local bodega are good; the ice-cream sandwiches at 7-Eleven are good; the melting vanilla cones served up by Mister Softee with a comically insufficient single tissue-thin napkin are good; even Fudgie the Whale and Cookie Puss, Carvel's ancient, low-rent ice cream cakes — and probably the rock-bottom ice cream product in the world — are good, if you let them melt for a while. The truth is that everybody likes ice cream, no matter how badly it's made or marketed.

And if that's not the definition of a national food, then what is?

See [pictures of what makes you eat more food.](#)

See "In Ice Cream Sales, No Sign of a Double Dip."

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