

The Ice Man Cometh

Every week, kibbutznik David Leichman prepares homemade ice cream from natural ingredients, using traditional techniques. Ironically, it's his love of the cold treat that stops him turning pro.

Ronit Vered | May 30, 2013 5:44 PM

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The ice cream crisis took place about five minutes after production began. Until then, things were moving along with exemplary calm in the home kitchen on Kibbutz Gezer. David Leichman, a mustachioed guy with a nice beer belly ("I know where every gram came from, and I'm pleased with every one," he says, affectionately caressing his round belly), went out to the yard to pick a bunch of mint to immerse in a concentrate, to be used in mint ice cream. He then grated orange peels for orange ice cream. Next, he removed from the refrigerator a basic mixture made from milk, eggs and brown sugar that he had prepared the night before, and poured it into the metal container of a lovely ice cream machine, made by a craftsman and based on a model of the first ice-cream machine, which was patented in 1848. (In actual fact, the first ice cream machine was invented by an American woman named Nancy Johnson, two years earlier, but at the time women were not allowed to register patents for their inventions. Whatever the case, the first machine forever changed the history of ice cream and turned it into a product accessible to almost everyone.)

David lined the wooden sides with glittering layers of ice cubes and coarse salt, and then affixed a tiny electric motor to the device ("I've been preparing ice cream for 40 years; for 30 of them I turned the handle manually, and only a decade ago did I succumb to modern times and agreed to attach an electric motor. A friend warned that this was the earth-shattering equivalent to Bob Dylan's switch to an electric guitar. But it's easier this way.")

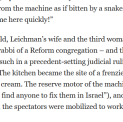
The motor of the ice cream machine purred, the metal container started to spin quickly and Leichman – his graying hair tied into a ponytail, as befits someone who spent the swinging '60s at Berkeley – then embarked on the next task: careful tasting and the choice of the perfect chocolate chips for the orange ice cream. The chocolate cupboard in the Leichman home is a treasure chest full of all kinds of chocolate bars, coins and snacks from the world's best chocolatiers, made with various proportions of cocoa solids. Indeed, each ice cream demands its own proper match.

Suddenly, the motor began to sputter. Another sputter, a real cough, a choking sound – and then the long and painful sound of blades fighting in vain to make their way through the sea of ice.

"Disaster!" shouted the good-natured ice cream maker in English – during a crisis, a person immediately returns to his mother tongue – and recoiled from the machine as if bitten by a snake. "I want to cry! Miri, Miri, come here quickly!"

Rabbi Miri Gold, Leichman's wife and the third woman in Israel to be appointed rabbi of a Reform congregation – and the first to be recognized as such in a precedent-setting judicial ruling – did not lose her cool. The kitchen became the site of a frenzied battle to save the orange ice cream. The reserve motor of the machine had also failed ("I can't find anyone to fix them in Israel"), and so, for lack of an alternative, the spectators were mobilized to work the machine manually.

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"Keep up the beat," Leichman pleaded to the inexperienced assistants, who quickly replaced one another in the backbreaking job of turning the machine's iron handle. To keep up their spirits, he began to sing sailors' songs. Drops of perspiration gathered on his forehead ("Some people say that sweat is the secret ingredient of traditional homemade ice cream"). Miri and David recalled the days when they enlisted fellow kibbutz members to prepare ice cream in the kibbutz dining room ("At the time you couldn't buy ice cubes. We used to freeze water in large tubs and shatter the ice with hammers.")

End of an era

All's well that ends well – the orange ice cream achieved the desired consistency and was sent to the quick-freezing refrigerator, but the devoted ice cream maker was disconsolate. "I don't have an ice cream machine, Miri, I don't have an ice cream machine," he kept muttering. "I can't even rely on the motors they manufacture anymore. You're witnesses to the end of an era. I've tried every possible ice cream machine in my lifetime, and the traditional ones, made from a genuine wood cask and containing delicate mechanical mechanisms, provide the best results.

"I've been buying them all these years from the same plant in Massachusetts, the last place that meticulously built real machines based on the classic specifications, and five years ago the plant was sold and the manufacturing moved to China. The machines they make," Leichman says, pointing to one in the kitchen, "justify all the negative stereotypes attached to the term 'Made in China.' The outside is made of inferior wood, the inner parts disintegrate in no time. Anyone who wants to buy a genuine ice cream machine today must look only for used ones."

David Leichman is an amateur ("I've never sold a single ice cream cone for a living") who knows more about ice cream than most professionals. In his kitchen, and in the storage room in his backyard, stand dozens of lovely, ancient ice cream machines. In the library in the living room there is an impressive collection of magazines, articles and books about ice cream, including "The Great American Ice Cream Book" (Paul Dickson). Every week he creates various ice creams and sorbet; there are at least five to six varieties in the freezer at any given moment. And every evening he sits with his 92-year-old father, who has moved in with his son and his daughter-in-law, for a daily ritual of enjoying homemade ice cream.

Leichman was born in 1951 in Brooklyn ("It's an important part of my Jewish identity") and grew up in Queens. His grandfather was the owner of a small diner that sold ice cream; his mother had a passion for ice cream; and from the day he was born he also demonstrated great affection for the cold confection.

"With my lunch money I bought only ice cream," he recalls, "and the money I earned from delivering newspapers I wasted on ice cream. At the fancy bar mitzvah they did for me, I entered the hall dressed as an ice cream man and distributed ice cream to the children from a cart.

"In June 1974," he adds, "friends bought me my first machine, and since then I've never stopped making ice cream. I taught myself, from books and through endless trial and error – as God is my witness, I even made ice cream from fresh spinach and avocado – and from the owners of classic American ice cream parlors, such as Old Uncle Gaylord's in San Francisco, who shared traditional knowledge with me."

Education has always been his main vocation. Leichman was active in Jewish youth groups in various places in the United States, and part of a core group that immigrated to Israel in 1976 to settle on Kibbutz Gezer (south of Ramle). As part of the preparation for kibbutz life the young idealist also took a professional cooking course ("We were a product of the intellectual ferment in America in the 1960s and '70s, and because we believed in feminism – and I've always loved to eat – I thought I should work in the kitchen rather than in the fields. At the time they didn't even call it gender, but exchanging roles in the battle of the sexes").

When he arrived in Israel and was sent to "intern" in the kitchen of nearby Kibbutz Tzora, he first met Miri Gold, a new immigrant from Detroit, and eventually his wife and the mother of his three children ("She agreed to marry me only when I said that I loved her more than ice cream"). In recent years Leichman has been guiding groups, mainly American tourists and businessmen, who come to learn about the land of the Bible. Moreover, in addition to tours dealing with the history, culture of everyday life and the fauna of the Biblical lands, the goarmand also offers a culinary tour in the alleys of the Ramle market. This warm and generous man receives a loving welcome from the merchants ("The Ramle market is a genuine farmers' market, of farmers who still bring their produce to the market personally," he observes).

Lately, he has also been toying with the idea of turning his ice cream making into a business, but he finds it difficult to accept the transition to commercial production, and to compromise on taste. The taste and texture of the homemade ice creams he produces, on a minuscule scale and using traditional techniques, is very different from commercial ice creams, even those produced in small boutique parlors.

"I can't criticize anyone who makes ice cream for a living," he says, "because I don't have to include the price of the ingredients in the price of the ice cream. I can use the most expensive ingredients in the world when I'm making my own."

Leichman is as good as his word: His marvelous banana ice cream, which like all the others is made from fresh fruit without preservatives, also contains pecans roasted in butter; he makes the chocolate ice cream from Valrhona's 80 percent chocolate; and the halvah and pistachio is made from fine raw tehina produced in the Jerusalem hills and two types of choice pistachios. This talented man relies on his palate and experience, and the selection is dizzying.

For her part, Rabbi Miri turns the endless quantities of egg whites (only yolks are used for making ice cream) into wonderful cakes and cookies.

"That's why we call her Rabbi Cook," says her husband jokingly. "And sometimes Rabbi Cookie," she adds.

"And I'm the rebbetzin, the rabbi's wife," adds Leichman, concluding the sweet dialogue.



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