

# Fun & profit come in many flavors

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great odds. Nationally, independent ice cream retailers face the grim statistic of a 75 percent failure rate within five years, according to the National Ice Cream and Yogurt Retailers Association in Columbus, Ohio.

But Libowsky is on the high end of the market, selling premium ice cream — defined as 14 percent butterfat and less than the typical 1-to-1 ratio of air to dairy product — that he makes on the spot.

The premium ice creams, pioneered by Haagen-Dazs and Ben & Jerry's, are the fastest-growing sector of the industry. Their sales have increased 6 percent to 8 percent annually in recent years while the more conventional regular ice cream sales have been flat.

As an on-site manufacturer, Libowsky is in the minority. The bulk of independent or franchised retailers ship in their product. Libowsky makes his in a batch freezer and freezes it in a hardening cabinet. The process gives him more control of his product's quality.

Inside his ice cream shop, adorned with



**Ice cream products consume about 8 percent of total U.S. milk production.**

paintings of cows and tucked away in a strip mall, Libowsky sells birthday cakes, pies and up to 70 flavors of ice cream, depending on what he feels like making that week. He also sells off-site to restaurants.

Libowsky's previous careers would seem to have given him little preparation for such a venture.

He's worked as a border patrol agent in South Texas, owned a jewelry store in Milwaukee and brought the Mexican pop music group Menudo to Southern California back in the 1980s.

But ice cream — and fun — have been part of the Milwaukee native's lifelong dream.

"You could kind of see it in him," says Glynn Snee, Libowsky's supervisor during his five years at the Transportation Department. "I've seen him eat desserts. He always liked to try different things."

Libowsky, who has long enjoyed making frozen desserts for his in-laws, says he began planning in earnest in October to open an ice cream shop.

He went to a convention of ice cream retailers, sought advice from another

independent retailer and then searched for just the right location.

He looked in downtown Fort Worth, but settled on Bedford when he took his daughter to a party at The Little Gym on Harwood Road. Between the children's gym and an art studio for children was a



**98 percent of all U.S. households consume frozen desserts. Annual per capita consumption amounts to 24.1 quarts.**

"What I liked about the Mid-Cities is that it's centrally located," Libowsky says. "It's close to Arlington and Grapevine, where some of my clients are. And Bedford has that small-town-type feeling."

The experts say finding a prime location is a key for ice cream retailers, particularly independents.

"Baskin-Robbins is tough to compete against because they also own Dunkin' Donuts, so they can put their stores adjacent and achieve better traffic," says Howard Waxman, editor of *Ice Cream Reporter*, a trade journal based in Santa Fe, N.M. "Location is absolutely crucial. You have to have good walk-by or drive-by traffic and can't have a lot of other ice cream competition close by."

In addition, a retailer needs "outstanding product and the willingness to put in long hours," Waxman says.

That's because, in recent years, consumers have become increasingly picky about their ice cream.

From the time Roman emperors sent their servants into the mountains to gather snow to make fruit-flavored frozen desserts, the world has been captivated by ice cream.

Ice cream was known to be a delicacy in Europe through the Renaissance and was brought to the New World by the upper classes of colonists. Through the 19th century, it was the dessert of choice among the elite. The 20th century, with the advent of mechanical refrigeration, finally brought frozen desserts to the masses.

"The home refrigerator did more to popularize ice cream, as a mass product, than just about anything else," Waxman says.

But that market expansion inevitably led to a decline in quality. Mass production emphasized

less butterfat and more air, resulting in the generally nondescript product that dominated most supermarkets through World War II and for a couple of decades thereafter.

Most of the innovation in the industry came through different serving

methods, such as the cone, the ice cream bar and the ice cream sandwich.

"America didn't invent ice cream," Waxman says. "But we did invent the cone."

Beginning in the 1970s, with the advent of

Haagen-Dazs' "pre-began to think of ice and cigars. No longer bought in bulk at the epicurean adventure 1980s, Ben & Jerry's social statement.

The move of ice cream freezer has created a

"Ice cream retailers people think they can without much effort Buckley, president of Yogurt Retailers Ass.

"The truth is just the Libowsky spends his product to restaura-

At the ice cream store he learned "that the move was to just sit back a come in the front door

Henry Gentry, another who advised Libowsky venture, agrees.

"You'll die in the sales to restaurants why it becomes important cream cakes and pies business in December do in the heat of summer

Buckley says Libowsky biggest problem most high-quality product

"On-site manufactur-



absolutely guarantee a product that you want independent retailers of supply are underper-

Quality is indeed in something of a guru for retailers. He has operated since leaving Southland Gentry is something of a mixer. He has experience with more than 1,000

"There are two things ice cream store success: premium quality. Put something that they can

The second, and most smile on the face of the

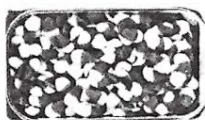
"This isn't the kind if you go around with Gentry says. "You have come in and want not This is a happy business

And that's why Libowsky dream.



Fort Worth Star-Telegram/IAN MCVEA

Joe Libowsky stirs marshmallows and almond slivers into a batch of Rocky Road ice cream.



**Households headed by 35- to 44-year-olds with children consume 60 percent of all frozen dessert products.**