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The science of sweetness

SARAH BILLS - North County Staff

Vapor rises from a bowl of liquid nitrogen below a picture of Albert Einstein and various educational science posters that decorate the walls.

Don't be confused by the periodic table or the beakers. It's not a lab or a science museum. In fact, it's an ice cream shop -- the only one of its kind.

Jerry Hancock, 38, the owner of Sub Zero Ice Cream, located on 934 N. State Street in Orem, uses liquid nitrogen to create ice cream for customers on the spot.

After patrons select an ice cream flavor, how strong it will be and the fruit or candies they want mixed in, they watch as liquid nitrogen is poured over their dessert, freezing it.

Because the process creates micro-batches, Hancock can tailor each order to meet his customer's craving. One can pick from a variety of cream including low fat, regular, custard, yogurt and soy milk.

And since the fresh cream is frozen in front of them, customers can even choose their ice cream's texture. The faster Hancock freezes the mixture, the smaller the ice crystals are, and the creamier the ice cream becomes.

"Now it's your ice cream not anybody else's," Hancock said, "right down to the texture."

The shop's science theme has been his dream since the store's conception.

"There are lots of restaurants with sports themes and I like sports, but quite frankly where does it get you?"

Hancock asked. "But, if someone can come in here and get excited about education because of ice cream that's really something."

Hancock's bachelor's degree in chemistry from Brigham Young University aids him in sharing his love of science and education with others.

He's lectured at elementary, junior high and high schools along the Wasatch Front this past year before showing students how he creates ice cream. Various other schools have taken class field trips to the shop and learned how the process works.

"I think he gets a kick out of being able to share things he's learned, but not actually used in the past," said his wife, Naomi.

Hancock said without trivializing the dangers, he simply wants people to know that science is safe and can be fun.

After hearing about professors creating ice cream with liquid nitrogen for class demonstrations, he decided to give it a try.

He was told that ice cream frozen by liquid nitrogen was not a commercially viable product because the ice cream tends to be either too soft or too hard.

"I said, 'Well, we'll see about that,'" Hancock recalled. "We just started experimenting."

Four months later, he had developed a formula, including the right shape of the bowl and the correct ratio of cream to nitrogen, to prove his would-be skeptics wrong.

His customers say they like more than just the store's atmosphere.

DaVee Wennerholm, a recent customer from American Fork whose children first introduced her to the unique ice cream, said she comes in a couple of times a week now.

"We used to drive all the way to Salt Lake to get custard," Wennerholm said. "We don't anymore. I've eaten custard all over the world and this is the finest in the nation."

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