

The Delicious History of Ice Cream



By Tory Avey

For most Americans, the phrase “ice cream” conjures up memories of summer, like slurping melted cones, banana splits, hot fudge sundaes, root beer floats, and buying a scoop from the drug store when it only cost a dime. Ice cream is the ultimate old-fashioned treat. This dessert has a very worldly history that stretches all around the globe. In India, there’s kulfi. In Italy, gelato. In Japan, mochi. It seems every country has its own spin on the delicious frozen confection we Americans call ice cream. This sweet stuff gets around! So where exactly did it come from?

There are several myths about the origin of ice cream. Some say Marco Polo brought it back from his travels to the Far East. Others say that Catherine de Medici introduced it to France when she relocated to marry King Henry II. Neither tale is likely to be true, though both are romantic. In fact, ice cream has a much more ancient history. Its earliest form holds very little resemblance to the ice cream we eat today. Biblical passages refer to King Solomon enjoying cooling iced drinks during harvest season. Alexander the Great of ancient Greece loved to indulge in icy drinks flavored with honey or wine. During Nero’s reign of Rome from 54 – 68 BC, ice was harvested from nearby mountains and held in “ice houses”—deep pits covered with straw. This practice of keeping ice in lieu of refrigeration would be common for centuries to come.

The emperors of the Tang Dynasty (618

– 907 AD) are believed to have been the first to eat “a frozen milk-like confection.” This version was made with cow, goat or buffalo milk that was heated with flour. Camphor, an aromatic substance harvested from evergreen trees, was added to enhance the texture and flavor. The mixture was then placed into metal tubes and lowered into an ice pool until frozen. This process is similar to the way Indians made kulfi prior to refrigeration.

In medieval times, Arabs drank an icy refreshment called sherbet, or sharabt in Arabic. These chilled drinks were often flavored with cherry, pomegranate, or quince. Over time, the drinks became popular with the European aristocracy. Italians are said to have mastered this drink-making technique, with the French following suit shortly after.

The 17th century saw ice drinks being made into frozen desserts. With the addition of sugar, sorbetto was created—or, as we more commonly know it, sorbet. Antonio Latini (1642–1692), a man working for a Spanish Viceroy in Naples, is credited with being the first person to write down a recipe for sorbetto. He is also responsible for creating a milk-based sorbet, which most culinary historians consider the first “official” ice cream.

In 1686, a Sicilian named Francesco

If you grew up in America, odds are you know this little foodie rhyme: “You scream! I scream! We all scream for ice cream!”

Procopio dei Coltelli opened Paris’ first café, Il Procope. The establishment became a meeting place for many famous intellectuals, including Benjamin Franklin, Victor Hugo and Napoleon. The café introduced gelato, the Italian version of sorbet, to the French public. It was served in small porcelain bowls resembling egg cups. Procopio became known as the “Father of Italian Gelato.”

Around the same time, the French began experimenting with a frozen dessert called fromage. French confectioner Nicolas Audiger, in his book “La maison réglée,” describes several fromage recipes made from ices flavored with fruit. One early recipe includes cream, sugar and orange flower water. Audiger also suggests stirring ices during the freezing process to introduce air and create a fluffier texture. Despite the dessert’s name, fromage was not made from cheese. It’s not completely clear why they called it fromage. The word may refer to the cheese molds that were used to freeze the ice cream, or it may simply be a lax French term for any compressed or molded edible substance. Whatever the reason, during the 18th century frozen fromage became quite popular throughout France.

It is impossible to say how exactly ice cream reached America, but it likely arrived with European settlers in the early 1700’s. By this

time, several books on confectionery had been produced and included recipes for ices and ice cream. Housewives would serve these treats to guests in the shape of vegetables, fruits and animals, thanks to special ice cream molds. In 1790, the first ice cream parlor opened in New York. During the summer of the same year, our first president, George Washington, is said to have spent \$200 to satisfy his craving for the refreshing treat. Inventory records of his Mt. Vernon home also indicate that he owned several ice cream pots made from tin and pewter. Thomas Jefferson is said to have kept several ice houses, able to hold up to 62 wagonloads of ice, along with copious amounts of ice cream. Even the Lincolns had a taste for the cold stuff. Before and during his presidency, Abraham Lincoln’s wife Mary Todd frequently hosted “strawberry parties” for friends in both Springfield, Illinois and Washington to celebrate berry season. Fresh ripe strawberries were served with cake and... you guessed it...ice cream.

Though its history spans worldwide and over centuries, ice cream has made itself quite comfortable in America, becoming one of the most popular desserts in the country. A staggering 9% of American cow’s milk production is dedicated to ice cream. Apple pie might be the most traditionally American dessert, but what is served as its most popular sidekick? Vanilla ice cream, of course! This creamy iced treat has firmly planted itself in the hearts of foodies across America.

