

New Machine Creates Custom Ice Cream on Demand

By Ned Smith
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A new machine lets users create customized premium ice cream in only 40 seconds, freeing ice cream fans from the tyranny of the freezer. The downside: The fridge-sized machine is not set up for home use. But it is bringing instant ice cream to select college campuses and businesses.

The MooBella Ice Creamery machine uses a newly patented technology to instantly aerate, flavor and flash freeze ice cream mixes in 96 combinations of premium or light, 12 different flavors and three mix-in ingredients. Customers make their selection in three easy steps using the machine's interactive touch screen, the company says.

The concept of offering made-to-order treats of premium ice cream mixed with ingredients such as M&Ms or chocolate chips was pioneered in by Steve Herrell in 1973 at his eponymous chain of ice cream parlors in Boston.

MooBella has given that concept a 21st century spin by automating the process and using 100 percent all-natural dairy ingredients that require no refrigeration. "We took it one step further from Steve Herrell," Bruce Ginsberg, CEO of the Taunton, Mass.-based MooBella, told TechNewsDaily.



Cheaper, greener ice cream

Traditional factory-produced ice cream has to be shipped at minus 20 degrees to prevent the growth of ice crystals, which are the enemy of quality. This is an expensive method. MooBella's ingredients are shipped in aseptic packaging that requires no refrigeration.

"It simplifies logistics and is the most cost-effective way to get product from point A to point B," said Ginsberg. It's also less detrimental to the environment. "It's the most carbon-friendly ice cream in the world," he said.

The machines are configured to operate in high-volume environments such as college campuses, hospitals and business cafeterias where attendants on staff can collect payments. Ice Creamery Machines debuted last fall on the Northeastern University campus in Boston. The machines are now available at 12 sites in four states, including Johnson & Wales in Providence, R.I., Lawrence and Memorial Hospital in New London, Conn., and SUNY Albany in New York.

Each machine can dispense 200 servings before it needs to be refilled, which takes just minutes. Because they are linked to MooBella's headquarters via the Internet, Ginsberg said, "We have the ability to monitor the machine's health and consumer preferences. On college campuses, cake batter is the number one flavor. At hospitals it's light coffee with cookies." Flavors can be quickly changed to meet shifting consumer preference.

Foodservice operators set the price. On average, it's \$2.85 per serving.

MooBella's machines feature modular design, which makes it easy for operators to refill, clean and maintain and monitor inventory.

Other products on the horizon

Ginsberg said the company will continue to expand throughout the Northeast and is on track to have 22 locations by the end of this month and 50 by September.

By September the company expects to begin rolling out unattended machines that accept noncash payment such as credit and debit cards or student and employee identity cards.

The technology can be reconfigured to serve other areas in frozen desserts such as yogurts and sorbets, or be adapted to produce frozen beverages such as smoothies, Ginsberg said.

But he sees other opportunities for the technology that are far afield from the food industry such as cosmetics. Imagine, he said, an interactive kiosk that could analyze a customer's skin and features and prepare and dispense customized beauty products on demand.

The bottom line in ice cream is all about taste. MooBella takes pride in the quality of its ice cream. The company's brand managers visit each machine daily to train foodservice staff, service the machines and ensure "everyone understands the commitment to quality," Ginsberg said.