Desserts:
Restaurants serve unusual Ice cream in Brevard County

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Thomas Jefferson was renowned for serving it at the White House. Dolly Madison had it at her husband’s inaugural ball. And Franklin D. Roosevelt reportedly confessed he liked to have it at least once a day.

But would today’s flavors pass presidential muster? Thai basil ice cream, anyone? How about jalapeno ice cream? Or wasabi ice cream?

Baskin-Robbins’ Rocky Road may have been the epitome of exotic back in the day, but now it’s about as unadventurous as vanilla and chocolate.

So are chocolate mint, coffee and chocolate chip -- also part of the ice cream chain’s original 31 flavors. And chocolate fudge sounds as uninspiring as pepperoni pizza.

While ice cream retailers still compete by devising various sweet flavors using candy, cookies and even alcohol, many are branching out to appeal to other palates, incorporating vegetables, meat and spices into the frozen treat.

For a limited time, Denny’s has introduced a Maple Bacon Sundae as part of its "Baconalia" festival (the celebration of bacon), a treat made with vanilla ice cream, maple flavored syrup and diced hickory-smoked bacon.

Merritt’s Table on Merritt Island has made cranberry ginger sherbet and red beet sorbet, the latter from red beet puree. And chai tea ice cream is on the menu at Ossorio in Cocoa Village, which also makes its ice cream on the premises.

What’s behind the innovation with ice cream?

"Everybody wants to come up with the latest new flavor that’s going to make a hit in the United States," said Lynda Utterback, executive director of the National Ice Cream Retailers Association. "I think people do tend to try something unusual. That’s kind of how you learn what you like and don’t like."
Early experiments

Exotic ice cream is not a new trend. Europeans were experimenting with flavors in the 17th and early 18th centuries, according to "Asparagus Ice Cream, Anyone?" an article written by food historian Jeri Quinzi that appeared in the spring 2002 issue of Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture.

She wrote that confectioners tried everything from breadcrumbs to grated cheese to candied orange flavors in ice cream. Most of the experiments were successful (not the foie gras or the pureed asparagus).

More recently, French chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten arrived in the states in the mid-1980s and began serving basil ice cream, said Chef James McGuinness of Keiser University-Melbourne.

And chef Heston Blumenthal of Britain's Fat Duck restaurant created a sweet and savory bacon-and-egg ice cream in the mid-2000s, which earned him notoriety. (It is said he overcooked egg custard for an ice cream and it became scrambled.) In 2006, two contestants on Bravo's "Top Chef" made bacon ice cream.

"So exotic flavors have been around for a while," McGuinness said. "Getting into the public has taken a while. People are more interested in vanilla and adding things to it."

What's ahead

Ideas for new ice cream flavors come from an array of sources, including customers, local storeowners and culinary trends.

Dinner in New York City was the inspiration behind the pretzel ice cream coming soon to Marble Slab Creamery and MaggieMoo's Ice Cream and Treatery, said Hilliard Creath, brand R&D manager for GFG Management, parent company of the brands. Buttermilk ice cream was on the menu that night.

The promotion for MaggieMoo's this summer is Maggie at the Moovies, with products incorporating theater snacks, Creath said.

"So what we did is create a buttermilk-flavored ice cream and added chopped chocolate-covered pretzels."

Marble Slab also is debuting oatmeal cookie ice cream and hazelnut ice cream, a spin on Nutella, in addition to 16 new Signature Shakes, including a strawberry shortcake shake.
At MaggieMoo's, which has several locations in Florida, though none in Brevard, the menu will include cocoa caramel ice cream (think Milk Duds), green apple ice cream, root beer ice cream and chocolate malted ice cream. MaggieMoo's also will introduce 13 new ice cream combination (in addition to two new shakes and one coke float, for a total of 16 new products), such as a blend of Udderly Cream ice cream with Rice Krispies, M&M's and marshmallows.

Ray Karam, senior tastemaker for Kahala Corp., parent company of Cold Stone Creamery, said he always is looking for the new and unusual. He created Oreo Crème Filling ice cream after Kraft Foods approached him about using the cream middle of an Oreo cookie in ice cream.

"I don't just look at ice cream, cakes or pastries," he said. "I look at everything, even food. There may be a certain aspect to a certain dish that could be applied to a creation or flavor."

Karam submitted 25 new flavors last month -- 12 will be coming out next year, including a salted caramel ice cream. (He called the new flavors "wow flavors"). Lemon poppy seed is the newest Gold Cone flavor of the month.

"Culinary is just taking off," he said. "People are becoming more sophisticated about what they eat and wanting to try new things. I think it's great. To see what ice cream can become beyond just plain vanilla, I think, is incredibly exciting."

Despite all the marketing and hoopla over the exotic, what sells are the staple flavors, said Leroy Chandler, sales supervisor at DeConna, an ice cream distributor in Orange Lake in north Central Florida. Vanilla, chocolate, strawberry and butter pecan.

He said the ice cream sandwich, Nutty Buddy ice cream cone and Popsicle remain popular at ballgames, county fairs and other seasonal events.

"Yes, people go in and say, 'I'd like to try that,'" Chandler said about the unusual flavors. "But the bread and butter are always going to outsell."

That seems to be true for the mom and pops and larger chains.

Vanilla is the most popular flavor at Dandies Soft Serve Ice Cream in Melbourne Beach, owner Jayne Vokes said. The shop
rotates other flavors, such as pina colada and Key lime pie. The all-time favorites at Ice Cream Junction & Oriental Food Mart in Cocoa Beach are vanilla and chocolate, even though the shop has 44 flavors (counting frozen yogurt and sorbet), including caramel cashew brittle and jamocha fudge brownie, operations manager Boots Razon said. And Sweet Cream rules at Marble Slab. Udderly Cream ice cream is the top seller at MaggieMoo's.

There is room for the traditional and the new, Creath said. He said he wants to push the envelope. He's pondering ice cream with Latino or Asian influences.

"I think food especially in this category -- it is fun and people are looking to have a good time," he said. "There are some days you feel like a little adventure. There are some days you really want something tried and true."

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Where to buy ice cream

Merritt's Table, 170 N. Grove St., Merritt Island, 321-208-7957

Ossorio Bakery and Café, 316 Brevard Ave., Cocoa, 321-639-2423

Marble Slab Creamery, 1505 W. New Haven Ave., West Melbourne, 321-956-6338; or 3682 N. Wickham Road, Melbourne, 321-757-5575

Dandies Soft Serve Ice Cream, 2990 S. State Road A1A Melbourne Beach, 321-243-9887

Ice Cream Junction & Oriental Food Mart, 214 W. Cocoa Beach Causeway, Cocoa Beach, 321-799-2714

Baskin-Robbins, 4640 W. Eau Gallie Blvd., Melbourne, 321-255-5045; 898 Palm Bay Road NE, Palm Bay, 321-723-7170; 4697 Babcock St. NE, Palm Bay, 321-674-9039

Denny's, 8175 N. Wickham Road, Viera, 321-752-0707; 75 E. Merritt Island Causeway, Merritt Island, 321-453-3050; 4530 W. New Haven Ave., Melbourne, 321-725-5540; 950 N. Wickham Road, Melbourne, 716-634-2121; 1245 N. Atlantic Ave., Cocoa Beach, 321-783-4005; 3500 Cheney Highway, Titusville, 321-268-4527