



Flavour of the month

What do oxtongue, parmesan, foie gras and squid ink have in common? They all figure in the new wave of savoury ice-creams. Is nothing sacred? Ed Caesar finds out who's got it licked. Photographed by Kane Skennar



Even Italians – the undisputed gelato specialists – are taking the savoury ice-cream fad under their wing, exploring all kinds of vegetable- and herb-flavoured delicacies.

reality-TV stunt has not been ruled out.

Even for educated palates such as Andrew McConnell, head chef at the multi-award winning Melbourne restaurant Circa, it's a case of once licked, twice shy. "I went to a very respected restaurant in London, that will remain nameless. They served me a salmon carpaccio with an anchovy ice-cream. It was truly revolting. Since then, I haven't been able to do savoury ice-cream. Maybe that's my problem – I might need to be gently reintroduced." Having said that, he happily admits to having basil ice-cream and a globe tomato granita on his menu. Circa's rating of three Chef's Hats signifies he knows what he's doing.

Despite nightmarish fish and offal concoctions, there is clearly a huge market for savoury ice-cream, a fact that was recognised two years ago by the massive multinational food giant Unilever. At the beginning of 2003, it announced "the biggest, most extensive program in the history of ice-cream" (whatever that means), and €100m (AU\$250m) was invested, purely for research, with savoury flavours such as curry and cheese forming a huge part of the company's investigations.

But is Mr Whippy really likely to offer a soft-serve beef vindaloo cone any time soon? Fritz Gelato on Fitzroy Street in Melbourne's St Kilda experimented last summer with beetroot/carrot but owner Rosa Raschella says it didn't sell well.

"People see gelato as a dessert. They want something sweet," she says. A more successful experiment was white chocolate/wasabi. "It was great. It finished a little hot like the chocolate/chilli." Maybe that's the secret of savoury ice-cream at any level, from five-star or footpath vendor: a deft hand in the mixing bowl.

Whether the entire savoury ice-cream frenzy will melt in the summer sun remains to be seen. Gelatomassi's LaRosa is confident the future is bright. "I'm looking to open four kiosk-style savoury gelato bars around Sydney in the next six months. Very small, only 10 flavours sold in conjunction with fresh vegetables. We'll have the carrots there and we'll make carrot gelato. You won't find vanilla, you won't find strawberry," he says.

It's clear that chefs the world over are enamoured with ice-cream as a way to introduce patrons to whole new culinary worlds. One thing's for sure. With the arrival of bespoke ice-cream making, anyone can satisfy their weirdest cravings – gelato makers in particular. "The most unusual flavour that I've tried is probably a fish roe gelato with fresh lime," says Larossa. "It was excellent. I don't make it in my store," he says, before adding the three words sure to strike fear into the heart of any traditional vanilla lover: "Not yet anyway." ■

HOW TO MAKE

Blumenthal's classic smoked bacon and egg ice-cream

INGREDIENTS

300g honey-cured bacon
50g bacon
1 litre full-fat milk
25g milk powder
24 egg yolks
125g liquid glucose

INSTRUCTIONS

Roast the bacon in an oven at 160°C until slightly browned. Chop bacon into small pieces. Add it to the cold milk, add half the milk powder and leave to marinate overnight. Tip the milk and bacon into a casserole dish and add the rest of the milk powder. Put the egg yolks and glucose in a bowl and mix at high speed with an electric whisk until they are white and increased in volume. Heat the milk mixture to simmering and pour a little on the eggs, while still mixing. Add this back to the pan with the rest of the milk and cook to 85°C. Hold it for 30 seconds then remove from the heat. Cool by stirring it over ice. Pass it through a chinois sieve to remove the bacon. Put it in a blender and liquidise until smooth. Finally, churn it in an ice-cream maker.

ng. "People have got to say 'wow'," gelato's Joe Di Maria. "I get a bit when they say, 'That's a bit different.'" One's disputing Tetsuya's ice as the master of degustation his blue cheese iced treat (or any fine restaurants that serve mains in a m), there does seem to be an increasing less accomplished chefs for whom the well, less tasty. Di Maria recalls one horror story. "An apprentice chef d us. He was entering a competition ed him to find new and exciting ways ve. He wanted to make tripe ice-cream. way through the manufacturing asked him, 'Are you sure tripe should ice-cream?'" We all know the answer stion.

harsh to single out one chef or er when there are increasing numbers cream related products on the market, Delight in Delaware, USA, surely can't the owner, Chip Hearn, has made a 35-

year-long career out of blundering his way through all five food groups and turning them into frozen treats. At the tame end of the spectrum is honey/fig or pear/green tea. At the other end, reserved for only the brave at heart with cast iron stomachs, are flavours such as mushroom/pecan, cucumber/onion, barbecue or bacon (complete with frozen bacon bits in it). Udder Delight? Shudder Delight.

If the idea of savoury ice-cream isn't exactly enticing, be thankful you're not in Japan. In Tokyo, there has been a virulent strain of extreme ice-cream manufacture, which has thrown up such outlandish flavours as fish, chicken wings, oxtongue, eel, prawn and octopus. The rush to create these ices has been attributed to cool summers, an elderly population, and the increasing popularity of frozen yoghurts, although the possibility of it all being a huge

Not so long ago, choosing ice-cream was a simple business, involving a few basic questions. One scoop or two? Vanilla or chocolate? Flake with that? True, the choice expanded into technicolour in the early 1990s, with the explosion of chains offering an endless variety of exotic flavours at premium prices. But, broadly speaking, the ice-cream you were eating was still the same animal as in the old black-and-white days – filling, sinful and, most importantly, sweet.

This year, however, across the globe things have changed – savoury ice-cream is now all the rage. At Harrods in London a bespoke ice-cream service is being offered, with customers requesting such combinations as parmesan/pear, gorgonzola/honey and, even more disturbing, Marmite. Who knows whether, sooner or later, David Jones food hall will do the same? You may well laugh (just like the ice-cream lady at DJs did), but Joe Di Maria, co-owner of Sydney ice-cream factory Pure Gelato, says he's noticed a four-fold increase in savoury orders over recent years.

In Italy, the undisputed home of spectacular ice-cream, gelatarias are ignoring traditional flavours in preference for what is being called *gelato naturale* – ice-cream flavoured with all manner of vegetables and herbs. In Lygon Street and Leichhardt, gelatarias are following suit, bringing savoury ice-cream to the masses.

Take Gelatomassi, in Sydney's Newtown, for example, owned by brothers Salvatore and Francesco LaRosa. On a recent trip to northern Italy, Salvatore LaRosa proudly admits to sampling gelato flavoured with oddities like salami, prosciutto, provolone cheese and olive.

He claims all were "excellent". When asked whether his own tomato ice-cream is selling gang-busters, he hesitates. "People try it all the time. I make a point of offering [it to] them. Maybe 10 to 15 per cent actually purchase the product. But I guess the majority say no," he admits.

It's not that savoury ice-cream is an entirely new phenomenon – there are some recipes, such as camembert ice-cream, that date back to 1800. "Traditionally, chocolate was a savoury ice-cream served with chilli," says Jose Mendonca from ice-cream wholesaler Casa Del Gelato. "And once you think about it," he urges, "many of the flavours we think of as sweet, start out savoury, but have loads of sugar added: vanilla, coffee, pistachio." It's just that savoury flavours have never been so terribly fashionable.

Maybe the credit or blame lays with the phenomenon known as "molecular gastronomy" and the work of haute cuisine chefs like The Fat Duck's Heston Blumenthal in the UK, El Bulli's Ferran Adrià in Spain and our very own Tetsuya Wakuda. Practitioners of "molecular gastronomy" focus on the science of why things taste the way they do, and go to much trouble reducing ingredients to their purest flavour components and presenting them in unexpected ways. Tetsuya, while not strictly of that school, is enormously influential among

culinary types here – and he does have a blue cheese ice-cream on his degustation menu.

Technology also plays a roll. "With traditional ice-cream, you freeze the liquid ingredients as you churn them," explains Robyn Wickens, the genius behind Melbourne restaurant Interlude (and winner of two Chef's Hats). "This new machine called a Pacojet lets you just freeze any ingredient solid and it uses blades to make a frozen mousse out of absolutely anything. For example, with our eggplant ice-cream, we simply freeze whole roasted eggplants then feed them through the machine and it makes a semi-fredo."

If any single scoop can be said to have started the savoury trend among fine dining patrons, it would have to be Blumenthal's thoroughly British creation of smoked bacon and egg ice-cream. But it was Adrià, who really started the savoury ice-cream ball rolling. His restaurant is only open six months of the year so that Adrià can dream up new taste riots for his customers. It was there that ice-cream first turned up as a main course, with Adrià's best-known variety being parmesan flavour. His adventurous ways with the ice-cream scoop have helped him become hailed by many as "the best chef in the world".

Australian chefs are keen to point out that it's a brave new frozen world of flavour where anything is possible. Sheep's brain gelato, anyone? The more accomplished chefs, thankfully, admit they've discovered a few ground rules. "We have a cos lettuce ice-cream that we serve with our version of a Caesar salad," says Wickens from Interlude. "It works really well because cos lettuce is quite watery like ice-cream. Savoury spices like juniper also work well." But how does an ice-cream maker like Joe Di Maria from Pure Gelato know what flavours are going to work? The answer: trial and error – a lot of error! "We have a mission statement where we have to come up with a new flavour of the month, every single month. It sounds easy but when you actually have to do it, it's not that simple."

With more than a hundred flavours, he's been forced to come up with some uniquely Australian ice-creams such as lemon myrtle, and wattle seed and the vegetable taro. "It's a real surprise. Once it's cooked up, it has a beautiful aroma, kind of like freshly baked cookies," he says. At the moment, it seems Australian ice-cream lovers can't get enough. "I think we're fairly brave ice-cream eaters – guys especially," he says.

But the possibilities of savoury ice-cream can be dangerous when in the wrong hands. Sydney dining chef Anthony Flinn (protégé of the late El Bulli) who thinks some people are taking the trend a step too far. "Now it has gone to the nth degree," he says.

Maybe it's just a case of food snobbery. "Everyone is entitled to a little taste but not everyone is," says Jose Mendonca from Casa Del Gelato. "I supplies a tomato and red pepper gelato. Sydney's Western Suburbs Leagues ice-cream it goes down a treat."

"Everyone's doing savoury ice-cream," claims Flinn, "and that's why we're getting a bit in how much we serve in our restaurants. Some of the most terrible restaurants doing some of the most terrible things with ice-cream." Such as? "Squid-ink ice-cream. Who the hell thought of squid-ink ice-cream? Why would you make it? Without sounding too pretentious, it's just a case of the confection being in the wrong hands. People are saying it's the most insane, most provocative ice-cream I can think of? And then they make it."

It's abominations like these that have put savoury ice-cream a bad rap. Wickens sometimes a name makes all the difference. A lot of people have done savoury ice-cream badly. We sometimes don't actually call them ice-creams. Our eggplant ice-cream is a semi-fredo – when we serve it we let it melt. Others we might call frozen creams. "I think ice-cream people wouldn't find it as appealing," says. Basically, that's the point. Ice-cream

"WE HAVE A COS LETTUCE ICE-CREAM THAT WE SERVE WITH CAESAR SALAD"



Chocolate is being left behind in favour of more exotic flavours of ice-cream