

Bliss On the Lips

Larry and Luna's frozen adventures BY MOLLY TEMPLETON

It's not every day that you wander into the back room of your place of employment and find a delicious array of frozen desserts just waiting for you to taste. Rows of white paper pints with exotic names and flavors — who could resist?

The Margarita flavor was kicky, with a spicy bite. Lavender Wild Blueberry, sweetly delicious with zingy little dried fruits, was universally praised. But nothing beat the citrus bliss of Don't Worry, Be Happy, one of three "Herbal Alchemy" blends.

And it's all made with coconut milk. No dairy-laden stomachache this time.

Tastings like this — a spread of flavors and two smiling faces serving small scoops — have been a large part of the Coconut Bliss story. In a way, it all begins with \$1.50 and a half-off sale at Goodwill, where Larry Kaplowitz picked up an ice cream maker. He and Luna Marcus had moved to Eugene from the Lost Valley community in Dexter, and they were sorting out what to do next. "We were pretty sure it would be something to do with food, probably something to do with desserts," Larry explained. "We thought about chocolate for a long time."

Coconut Bliss is available at these locations:

Red Barn Natural Grocery
357 Van Buren St.

Sweet Life Patisserie
755 Monroe St.

The Kiva
125 West 11th Ave.

Friendly Street Market
2757 Friendly St.

New Frontier
1101 West 8th Ave.

Saturday Market
8th Ave. & Oak St.

Then the ice cream maker presented itself. "We both really love ice cream and always have," said Larry, "and over the course of many years, as we developed our own consciousness about food and diet, both in terms of health and ecology, we moved away from eating dairy products for a host of different reasons." Neither Larry nor Luna found the various soy and rice-based frozen treats very satisfying, but they'd tried coconut milk ice cream in Thai restaurants before and decided to give it a try on their own.

Even their first attempt went well. "The first recipe we found had all sorts of strange things in it, like corn," said Luna, laughing. "We left that out. We're both intuitive cooks, so it was more inspiration than anything. And it was actually pretty good."

Luna and Larry played with their recipes over the summer, and by fall they were ready to invest in a real ice cream machine. In January, the tasting parties

began. "People would come and just hang out," Larry said. "It was a party. We did about eight of these and started having these little survey forms. So people would be sitting there rating each flavor and having impassioned discussions."

A few flavors had to go, even if they got high marks from the tasters. "We had these weeks or months where we could not stop thinking up flavors," said Luna. Eventually, they had to set a limit. Currently, Red Barn Natural Grocery stocks 16 flavors of Coconut Bliss in their ice cream case, and ten flavors are packed in pints and sold at other stores. Sweet Life also has a few flavors in their gelato case. Lavender Wild Blueberry has been the most popular, with Chilcacahuatl, a zesty mix of chocolate and chili, coming in second.

All ingredients are organic, and agave was chosen over organic sugar. "It's raw,

so all the nutrients and a lot of minerals are preserved," said Luna, who also noted that agave's low glycemic index means it doesn't spike blood sugar the way other sugars might. As for coconut oil, "There's a lot of research coming out showing that it's really beneficial for your body," Larry said. The idea was to make a product with a small, simple ingredient list, one that's understandable to people and packed with as many local products as possible.

Production is currently in a small trailer in their driveway, but a bigger space is planned, along with bicycle carts for sidewalk scoop serving. They're also thinking of expanding to Portland, Seattle and beyond. "In a city like Eugene or Portland, there could be a lot of people on the streets making a living peddling Coconut Bliss from their bicycles," Larry said.

Every step brings a lot of questions, from transportation to pricing to franchising the business in other cities — all with a great deal of concern for community and sustainability.

Meanwhile, Larry and Luna said they're thrilled with the reception their frozen concoctions have gotten. Red Barn Natural Grocery has been supportive from the start, and recently the Kiva, Friendly Street Market and New Frontier have started carrying Coconut Bliss. Luna and Larry have set up shop at Saturday Market as well. "There's a really beautiful network of people in the natural foods industry in Eugene, and it's been really nice becoming part of that community," Larry said.

"That's what we're really looking for," Luna finished. "How we can include our community, and how we can be in our community." **EW**



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