

I SCREAM FOR SUMMER

Discovering my inner ice cream maker BY SARAH DECKER

These are a few things that mean summer to me: sunburns, chlorine-soaked hair after a day at the town pool and, perhaps most of all, ice cream. As summer threatens to push its way through this dense pile of clouds that have marked our drizzly, drawn-out springtime, I find myself thinking more and more of the glorious frozen dessert. Growing up in the oppressive heat of northern Nevada, a batch of my mother's homemade peach ice cream always signaled the kick-off to that most delightful of seasons.

Ice cream has always held a dear place in my heart — from those childhood days of chasing the ice cream truck down the street with a pocket-full of nickels to pressing my ruddy cheeks against the glass at Swenson's to those post-breakup nights, curled on my couch with the only two men in my life who have never let me down, Ben & Jerry.

It started as something of a joke. How amazing would it be to have my very own ice cream machine? I was only about 47 percent serious. But one day, walking the kitchen appliance aisle of the Goodwill, I found one, or maybe — like they say “the one” finds you when you're heart is ready — it found me. With its shiny body and come-hither five-dollar price tag, I had no choice but to put my money down and cart it home.

Let me level with you right from the start: I really don't know how to cook. I'm more of the rip-dump-heat kind of chef. But thinking back to those summers as a child, when my mother would pull out that old wood-paneled beast and start a batch churning on the kitchen counter, I dreamt about how wonderful it would be to capture that essence in my own adulthood. Not to mention that I began to picture myself as “the girl who makes ice cream,” beloved by friends and family and celebrated in my social circle. I would arrive at parties, a culinary masterpiece in hand, and we would all divine the many flavors and colors of summer.

My new appliance was home all of an hour before I drove to gather supplies for my virgin batch. I figured I'd go for something simple to begin with. I found a recipe for vanilla. Of course, I also tossed in a handful or three of chocolate chips because, really, if it's not chocolate, it's hardly worth it.

The process seemed simple enough. A little sugar, some cream, vanilla beans, mix, dump, churn, enjoy. I mixed, I dumped, I churned and then I watched as the little drum went to work.

When all was said and done, I was a little disappointed, my stride ever so slightly broken. The mixture was all ice and very little cream. After freezing it overnight, I was dismayed to find that my ice cream resembled more of a milky slurpie than anything you might consider smooth or creamy.

After poring over cookbooks and scouring the internet for another flavor, I settled on a mint chocolate cookie recipe from none other than my main men, Ben & Jerry. Instead of the cream base of the last failed batch, this one relied on a custard foundation, which meant it utilized eggs. Surging with confidence and telling myself that the first batch was akin to the first pancake, I plowed forward with my sophomore attempt.

As this batch churned, I relaxed back into my fantasy world, counting the minutes until I could call on the gals to drop by for some pre-summer cheer in the form of homemade bliss. But as I went to transfer the ice cream to freeze, I froze. The mixture was almost entirely liquid. Chunks of cookie floated in a sea of failure. I let it freeze overnight.

Come morning, my ice cream was one giant ice cube. On the upside, the flavor was heavenly, but flavor without consistency is a lot like Russian roulette without the bullet — it lacks some of the impact. I couldn't take this particular batch public. People would know I blew it, and that wouldn't do. I admit it: I was starting to get frustrated.

Human beings have been making ice cream for centuries, obviously with positive results. How is it that I could botch a process that existed long before electricity and years before anyone had ever heard of Ben or Jerry? My impulse was to blame the machine — clearly a lemon cast-off to Goodwill for good reason.

But if my culinary history has taught me anything, it's that rarely is it the appliance or utensil. This process began with hand grinding, something I was not entirely willing to do — though, heaven knows, by the end of this experiment I could use the cardio. But I digress: I had to have faith that the little machine would not fail me. I looked to the internet for wisdom. Turns out I'm not the only one to have a hard time figuring these things out. I found a treasure trove of tips. Armed with a few pointers, I set out to try anew.

Disappointing my old friend chocolate again scared me, so I let him sit this one out. I found a recipe for peanut butter ice cream, another cream-based concoction. Figuring I'd had at least marginally better success with cream, I went for it.

This time, I made absolutely certain I froze the drum for the machine overnight. I also mixed up the ingredients and put them in the refrigerator to cool completely before churning them, one of my many internet tips. After a few hours, some chunks began to form, so I called in a loaner blender to give it all a good, hard whirl. According to the web, this not only ensures that your ingredients are blended but gives the mixture one more dose of oxygen, which aids the whole process.

I dumped it into the drum, flipped on the machine and made just one simple request: “Work, damn it.”

As I transferred everything to the freezer, I noticed that, this time, something marvelous had happened: the ice cream had what I would confidently call structure. And,





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