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Cool Treats for Hot Days

Scooping up gourmet ice cream in the Twin Cities makes summer special.

By Gwenth Swain



Crema Cafe, home to Sonny's Ice Cream, sits on a busy corner in south Minneapolis.

Gwenth Swain

Minneapolis and St. Paul are best known for their extra large winters—cold, snowy and long. Surprisingly, the cities also have a small but snowballing reputation for gourmet ice cream. While they may work on batches of only five or 10 gallons at a time, local ice cream makers tantalize taste buds with flavors ranging from balsamic vinegar chocolate to savory-sweet salted caramel and everything in between.

Sonny's at Crema Cafe

In Minneapolis, the grand-daddy of all handmade ice creameries is Sonny's. Founded in 1945 by the late Martin "Sonny" Siron, Sonny's Ice Cream is best sampled at Crema Cafe on a sunny corner in south Minneapolis. Run by Carrie Gustafson and Sonny's son, Ron,

Crema is adjacent to the ice cream factory and serves a rotating selection of frozen flavors, along with a sophisticated cafe menu. It also boasts inviting outdoor seating, with shady gardens and quiet nooks.

The cafe's rich signature ice cream, called Crema, is a coffee-lover's delight, described as "the most sublime frozen latte you will ever taste." Along with other inventive ice cream flavors (think Guinness, Sweet Corn or Hot Chocolate), Crema offers a wider-than-usual selection of sorbets. Popular flavors include Cucumber, Blood Orange and Chrysanthemum.

Sebastian Joe's

Started in 1984, Sebastian Joe's is a small local chain with a line-up of more than 100 flavors, all kosher certified. Only about two dozen are available at any given time at the two Minneapolis locations. Some of the best-known are lush Raspberry Chocolate Chip and the opera-star inspired Pavarotti, a mix of banana, caramel and chocolate chips "so good it will make you sing." Other unusual tastes include Surly Bender (a mix of the microbrew Surly and chocolate), When Pigs Fly (combining bacon, maple, pepper and chocolate chips) and Immaculate Confection (honey, vanilla, ginger and bits of strudel).

Sebastian Joe's production facility in Minneapolis inspired what is perhaps its most headline-grabbing flavor in recent years: Nicollet Avenue Pothole. In spring, the streets around the production facility were pocked-marked. A local neighborhood group—hoping to get funding for repairs—urged Sebastian Joe's to create a flavor to raise awareness. Owner Michael Pellizzer served up a chocolate ice cream with a ribbon of road-tar-like fudge. His son, Matteo, suggested adding sea salt, a nod to pothole-producing road salt.

Newcomers Pumphouse and Izzy's

Sebastian Joe's and Crema Cafe are part of the area's ice-cream-making history, but relative newcomers such as Pumphouse Creamery and Izzy's Ice Cream Cafe are the wave of the future. Tiny Pumphouse in south Minneapolis starts with organic milk and cream from Crystal Ball Farms in nearby Osceola, Wis. Then owner Barb Zapzalka adds high-quality ingredients to create subtle taste treats—all of which can be eaten on house-made organic cones.

Ice-cream-making takes up most of the space, so inside seating is tight. That translates into lines around the block during the summer months. It's worth waiting for rich, creamy scoops of the popular Sea Salt, Caramel and Praline Pecan, along with Mango Habanera, Malted Chocolate & Malted Vanilla Swirl and Lemon Sorbet filled with nuggets of crystallized ginger. Two flavors (plain and peanut butter) of hand-crafted doggie ice cream bring many tail-wagging four-legged customers as well.

In St. Paul, just blocks from the Mississippi River, people, scooters and strollers clog the sidewalk in front of Izzy's Ice Cream Cafe. Inside, about 30 flavors are available at any given time, including nondairy, soy-based options. At the solar-powered cafe, a high-tech projection shows the lineup, changing the instant a flavor runs out. Izzy's lovers can also follow flavors online at the store's "Flavor Up" Web site or through e-mail and Twitter alerts.

Freshly made waffle cones are typically filled with kiddie, single or doubles—and then an "Izzy," a tiny bonus scoop on the top (about what you'd get in a melon scooper). Flavors range from Norwegian Chai (chai with bits of Norwegian cardamom-spiced toast) to Dark Chocolate Zin (chocolate, balsamic vinegar and Zinfandel wine) to kid-pleasing treats such as Dinosaur Egg (blue malted vanilla ice cream with malted milk ball chunks).

Summers are short in the Twin Cities. But the ice cream and sorbet treats at Crema, Sebastian Joe's, Pumphouse Creamery and Izzy's are available year-round—adding luscious flavor to all 365 days.

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A waffle cone can always be topped with a tiny scoop of ice cream called an "Izzy."

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