

Smitten in Lafayette

By Sophie Braccini



"Brrr" churns and instantly freezes ice cream. Photos Andy Scheck

Molecular cuisine is becoming main stream. Chin Chin Labs in London, Lab Made in Hong Kong, and now San Francisco-based Smitten, which just opened its fourth Bay Area location in Lafayette, offer liquid nitrogen creations to tantalize ice cream lovers.

For many years, innovation on the ice cream market revolved around new flavors; now the process that instantly makes ice cream to order is spreading all over the world. For Smitten founder Robyn Fisher, this is the way to create incredibly smooth, delicious ice cream – without the preservatives, stabilizers, or emulsifiers needed for packaged ice cream – so she can showcase the true flavor of the best local ingredients.

Fisher discovered the freezing property of liquid nitrogen in a lab at Stanford where she was a graduate student. "I was immediately taken by the way the liquid would create very fine crystals when it came in contact with another liquid at room temperature," she says. As a gas, nitrogen comprises roughly 78 percent of the air we breathe; it becomes a liquid at -320 degrees. As it warms it starts to bubble, returning to its gaseous form and instantly cooling the environment it is in contact with. Liquid nitrogen is not toxic at all, but it needs to be handled with care; touching it is not a good idea – it can do serious damage to skin. It's been used all over the world to create instantly frozen delights such as ice cream, sorbet and meringues.

"The problem was to find a way to turn the ice cream efficiently enough to make the smoothest ice cream," explains Fisher. She says that most people who make liquid nitrogen ice cream use a KitchenAid, as she did when she first got started, but the result was not good enough for this perfectionist. For two years, she worked in partnership with different engineers to create "Brrr," a churning machine that

makes one to four servings of ice cream to order.

Fisher took to the streets of San Francisco eight years ago with Brrr on a wagon. Now with four locations, the young business woman and mother of an 8-month-old baby says she does not want to grow her business too fast. "I own three patents for Brrr," she adds, "and I have been asked to partner with others to grow faster, but I don't want to. What I want is to make the best ice cream in the world, which means controlling the quality of the ingredients; and that takes care and time."

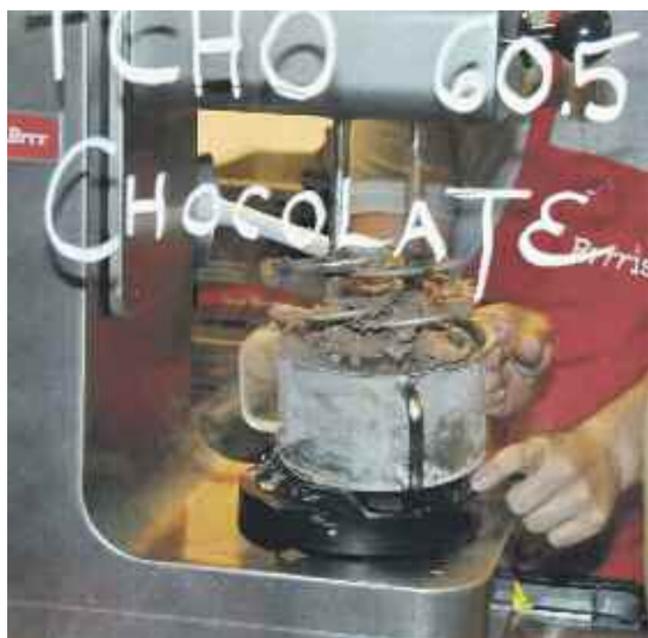
Most of her ice cream is made from cow's milk – although she offers a few coconut milk-based specialties – and that major ingredient comes from the organic dairy farm Beretta in Santa Rosa; the berries are from Swanton Berry Farm, also organic and based in California; the chocolate is from Tcho New American Chocolate in Berkeley.

"With the best process and the best ingredients, I also needed a chef who would create the recipes," says Fisher. "Our consulting chef is Robyn Lenzi, who designs all of our tastes."

The seasonal flavors change every week, but some favorites come back regularly. The Lafayette store was an immediate hit with flavors like strawberry, white balsamic, salted caramel, fresh mint and Tcho chocolate. You can also get an ice cream sundae. "People can buy pints of ice cream to go," says Fisher, "but since it does not contain any additive or preservatives it should be eaten quickly."

Smitten is open daily from noon to 10:30 p.m. (11 p.m. on weekends) at 3545 Mt. Diablo Blvd. in Lafayette; phone (925) 385-7115 or visit www.smittenicecream.com.

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